This is a reproduction of a library book that was digitized by Google as part of an ongoing effort to preserve the information in books and make it universally accessible.

Google™ books

https://books.google.com

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 11204 9063

GRAE'S COMEDY

GLADYS PARRISH

Digitized by Google

Carfrae's Comedy

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

NCW
Parrish

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Carfrae's Comedy

Digitized by Google

NEW SIX SHILLING NOVELS

OF HUMAN BONDAGE. *By William Somerset Maugham*

THE FREELANDS. *By John Galsworthy*

MUSLIN. *By George Moore*

OFF SANDY HOOK. *By Richard Deban*

THE LITTLE ILIAD. *By Maurice Hewlett. Illustrated by Sir Philip Burne-Jones*

THE IMMORTAL GYMNASTS. *By Marie Cher*

THE BOTTLE FILLERS. *By Edward Noble*

THE PUSH ON THE S.S. "GLORY." *By Frederick Niven. Illustrated*

LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN
21 Bedford Street, W.C.

Digitized by Google

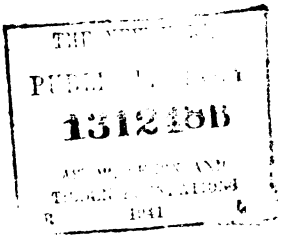
Carfrae's Comedy

By

Gladys Parrish

London
William Heinemann
1915

90
Digitized by Google



LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN, 1915

Digitized by Google

F

TO

MY GRANDMOTHER

K. S. J.

IN MEMORIAM

Rem 125

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER I

It was on a January afternoon in the early nineties that the three men spoke of Carfrae's play as they walked up Piccadilly together. The men wore their coats buttoned rather high and close, and Cecil Armathwaite, who had a gardenia in his buttonhole, followed another fashion of the day by affecting an air of weariness.

Yet no topic of conversation could have interested Armathwaite more than the one under discussion, for he had promised to produce Carfrae's play at his own expense, and this magnificent impulse gave him a sense of great importance. He felt a true patron of Drama as he listened to his friend Julian Eames trying to make Carfrae pronounce upon the future of the English Stage, but when Julian, in his attractive way, turned to him in gratitude, he met appreciation with a languid modesty.

"My part in all this will be so slight," he said—"of such excessively little value!"

"And I hear," continued Julian Eames, as they arrived at Armathwaite's club and went in, "that you have discovered an actress, someone we have never heard of, who is to appear in the leading part. It is most interesting. Is she very clever?"

"I would hardly say she was clever," said the dramatist. "But in this case I don't think she need be."

"You suggest a very original situation, for we so easily think it is supremely necessary to be clever. What is she instead? Has she temperament?"

"Temperament is an elastic term," answered Carfrae, more and more disliking the interested manner that was calculated to "draw him out." "It is used to explain unhappy marriages, bad technique in art, and lack of

Digitized by Google

self-control. In what way should you wish to apply it to Mrs. Benwell ?"

Julian smiled with charming good-humour, leaning against the edge of a table and smoking a cigarette.

"I am not very good at definitions, but temperament is surely, and quite simply, the power of experiencing emotion, and in an artist the power of conveying the idea of it. Temperament in an actress——"

"Is usually considered the art of conveying the idea of passion. With the ordinary man and woman, I suppose, that is it's only meaning."

"And isn't that enough ?"

"Enough to satisfy an audience, do you mean ? A modern audience perhaps, but not an ideal one."

"If one sought an audience in the realms of fancy, of course I don't know where one would go——"

But he was only amused by Carfrae's uncompromising attitude, just as he was only amused by Cecil Armathwaite in the rôle of a sort of Roman patron. He could see that Armathwaite was trying to be impressive, that the desire to be impressive had become an obsession, and he wondered how much George Carfrae was humouring the rich man in order to get a play for the first time before the public. The first night of this play promised great diversion.

The difference between the two men was also diverting, between George Carfrae's tall figure and singularly inexpressive face, and Cecil's slightness and blond, sleek boredom. While they had been talking Julian had wondered how he would describe Armathwaite's discovery to his other friends, and he thought he would probably say: "In looks he might be anything—a duke, or a butler, or a bishop, or even a detective." But he was not sure if it were really good.

"You would not apply any usual set of terms to Carfrae's play," observed Cecil, as the dramatist got up to speak to somebody who had just come in. "It is very reserved, very exquisite. The action is as inevitable and delicately restrained as a Greek vase."

Digitized by Google

Julian began to say something at the expense of the play, but checked himself as Carfrae strolled back to them.

"Your actress's name is Blanche Benwell, isn't it? A good name. Is it her own?"

"I should have thought Armathwaite would have told you about her by this time."

"He has told me something," answered Julian, purposely exaggerating the discretion of his manner.

Carfrae, who had been observing Julian much more carefully than Julian had observed him, had already noticed two separate effects created by Eames's manner and by his appearance. It was, in a way, impossible to dislike the latter, his eyes under their wing-shaped eyebrows were so meditative and disarming. But when he applied himself to an object, exerting his powers to please, his look changed and became almost too concentrated, and his interest and sympathy were so complete that there was a sudden hint of artificiality in them, a little too much glibness. It was then Carfrae felt that the man behind the manner was distinct from the man who ought to have belonged to the narrow, romantic face.

"I merely said I had great confidence in her—great confidence she would make an extraordinary impression. And, really, I would not say she was not clever," said Cecil, his interest in the absorbing topic beginning to show through, as though his pose had suddenly worn a little thin. "It is only that the play makes no demands of that kind upon her."

"You speak in riddles," said Julian. "What demands does it make upon her, then?"

"It was through seeing Mrs. Benwell that I got an idea for a play, and I said I would not write it if she were not to act in it. Since she promised she would, I have written it around her, for in no sense of the word," Carfrae added, "is she an ordinary actress."

It seemed to Julian that he was explaining something; he also noticed that while Cecil called her Blanche, Carfrae invariably alluded to her as Mrs. Benwell.

Digitized by Google

"Did Cecil introduce you to her?" he asked, slightly ironical.

"On the contrary, it was through me that he met her."

"And what is this idea of yours that she is personifying? Tell me, what sort of a woman is she? I would like to meet this Mrs. Benwell."

"Well, how about to-day? What is Blanche doing this afternoon, do you know, George?"

"I think she is at home," said Carfrae drily.

"But I am afraid, Julian, we cannot take you to see her, for we couldn't very well all three go together."

Julian abruptly showed his surprise. "And why not?"

"Because she lives, not only in Kensington, but in a convent."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Julian. "Is that our cue? How most unexpected!" But before the unaccountable resistance in Carfrae's manner he added: "And so she is a Catholic."

"You are, too, aren't you, Julian?"

"That happens to be the superstition that baptized me. But all the same you must present me to Mrs. Benwell, in spite of her convent. Will it be in spite of her husband as well?"

"She divorced her husband," said Carfrae, getting up again.

"Divorced! But our superstition does not allow divorce!"

"She may not as a Roman Catholic consider herself divorced, but she is divorced by law. That is quite possible, English law having nothing to do with the Roman Church. And now I must be off. I am afraid I cannot wait, Armathwaite." And ignoring Cecil's hints Carfrae departed unaccompanied, irritated at his own irritation.

He could never conceal his hostility when he met Julian Eames, whom, however, he knew but very slightly. He had noticed him across the room at Willis's only a short time before, and had asked who was the young man with the interesting air of melancholy, to which Cecil was able

Digitized by Google

to answer that they had been together at Oxford, and that he valued Julian Eames's literary criticism enormously. It was easy to gather from that that he had already spoken to Julian of the play, and, true enough, just a few days previously Julian and Cecil had dined at the same house, and had happened to leave it together.

In several years they had barely met and never thought of each other, but in his violent self-consciousness Cecil instantly conceived the idea of appearing important in Julian's eyes. In the first five minutes of their walk to the same dance he regretted that they had seen so little of each other; he remarked on the immensity of London, and remembered the delightful friendship at Oxford which had never existed. And before the other had time to put in a reply he told him he was about to produce a play at his own expense.

Julian was an incomparable listener, in which he obeyed that desire to please that was his strongest instinct, and by the time they reached their destination Cecil could not part from him; they retired almost at once to the smoking-room, where Julian sustained the seductive earnestness of his interest for over an hour. He said he was anxious to meet this happily discovered genius, and to make the meeting still more interesting Cecil spoke of each man to the other. To interest Carfrae he invented literary qualities for Eames, and hinted at offers made by eminent reviews anxious for so brilliant a critic; when, on top of that, the dramatist happened to notice Julian at Willis's, Cecil felt the moment was prophetic. He introduced them to each other that evening, and brought them together, later, more than once. It secretly delighted him to hear them talk; he only wished they would talk more. The part he himself was playing in the production of the Comedy glowed over every conversation like an aureole.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER II

CECIL was by nature imitative, and when he thought he was original he was copying, more or less, other people's originality; and yet at the same time he showed imagination in what he did; and as up to a certain point he was quick to assimilate ideas, it was not always easy to detect that he was imitating at all.

When he came under Carfrae's influence he grew observant, saw people as "types," and tried to discuss them psychologically. Had Carfrae possessed any distinctive style of speech he might have modified, or exaggerated, it to suit himself; but, as it was, he learnt to appreciate the value of words a little more than he had, and to see shades where he had never seen them. Thus when he first met Mrs. Benwell he said she was "a charming woman, a delightful woman!" and after a few weeks of Carfrae's acquaintance he knew better than to call her charming or delightful, for he had come to see that neither adjective described her in the least.

Then he met Julian Eames, and Julian seemed to him brilliant; therefore, while keeping up the literary aspirations with which the dramatist had inspired him, he tried to invest himself with the same dazzling attributes that characterized, for him, his new friend. He was divided between admiration of Carfrae and a kind of adoration of Julian.

Eames had come to London after spending several years abroad, and his immediate success, which was enviable, was achieved along social lines quite different from those previously adopted by Cecil. Cecil usually appeared fashionably bored, and Julian always appeared to be talking to the one person in the world he wished

Digitized by Google

to meet. His appearance, his manner, his voice, all so essential to his personality and its attractiveness, were not in Cecil's power to reproduce; but Julian's talk of things he had seen, the contents of his rooms, his views on life, his attitude to women, awoke in Cecil a desire to have seen the same things, to have similar interests quite as interesting, to have similar possibilities for enjoying existence. He dropped in on Julian in his flat at all hours, and felt, among other things, a strong dissatisfaction in seeing the thousand and one trophies of those years abroad delightfully and quite naturally displayed there; for he thought of his own Eastern room, which, though supervised by an Eastern friend, was entirely artificial, as he himself knew no more of the East than a trip round the world could teach him. With his enormous income he could have bought everything Julian had a hundred times over, but his possessions seemed lacking in what he vaguely thought of as "flavour." . . . His pictures, his bibelots, his place in the north, lost all value in his eyes when he saw Julian's collection of amulets, which was in reality not a very large or very accurate one, but which he had made himself among the peasants of Eastern Europe, and about which he could talk indefinitely, with a charming, rather deprecating enthusiasm and ease. The term "charming" was very descriptive of Julian when he was in a good mood. And his own life hitherto seemed lacking in all romance when Julian said: "My life has ever been a quest, but, as I sought the Unattainable, I had to content myself with a series of adventures."

About a month after his first meeting with Carfrae, Julian made his way to a second-hand bookshop in Farawell Street, Strand, that he had discovered some little time before. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than possessing a first edition of value, and two of the first editions then in his collection had gathered the dust of years in the shelves of this unprosperous little shop, upon which he had come quite by accident, his attention having been called to the street in which it stood by two

Digitized by Google

old houses, whose gables and quaintly projecting galleries attracted him at once. As he paused to look he had noticed, next door to one of them, a bookshop by whose door a tray of old books rested upon a trestle on the pavement.

He had stopped to finger them, and a page he read in a volume of poetry, published many years before, may have woven a spell about him, for as he glanced up with the book in his hands the unfrequented street seemed picturesque and pleasant, though a little sad. And as a chair-mender emerged out of an alley, crying his queer cry, the sound awoke in Julian the same odd and not unpleasant sadness that had been stirred by the vista of the street. He thought he felt the spirit of London and of winter in that one cry, and he stood thinking, until the sound was lost to the ear in the passing of a cart.

The house made the corner of two streets, and a small window in the wall to the left of the door illumined an old man bent over a reading-desk. Something in the way the light fell on his bent shoulders and grey head reminded Julian, as he entered, of a St. Jerome. But with the entrance of a stranger the old man looked up, and his face, malicious in its grotesqueness, was more like a gargoyle than an anchorite.

When Julian asked the price of the book he had selected, he said, "Half a crown," with little more than a glance at it, and Julian tried not to be too hasty in putting down the money; but, having paid, he thought he saw the old man smiling in a way that made him a little uncomfortable. The smile was perhaps an illusion caused by a slight muscular twitching about the mouth, but from his expression one might have thought he knew the value of the book perfectly well, as well as all that had passed in his customer's mind. In a sort of self-justification Julian loitered and spoke to him, and then asked him questions.

"We have there," he answered, taking his pen from behind his ear to point to the inner part of the shop, "a step lower than the level of the street, "a library. We

Digitized by Google

offer the books for circulation or sell them, as you prefer."

"I would like to look," said Julian; and instantly the old man resumed his reading, nor did he make a remark in the whole of the following hour, during which Julian examined, fingered, and read, alone in the inner room whose walls, with the exception of a door in the corner, were entirely covered with shelves.

The afternoon was in late December, and the dusk drew in before he had finished making his discoveries. The inner part of the shop had one window, but in spite of it he was in semi-darkness, and through the glass of the outer door that opened on the street he could see lights being lit one by one. At last he called out: "My good friend, is it not your habit to light up, too?"

Leisurely as ever, the old man left his desk and struck a match. As he shaded it with his hand his shadow leapt up the background of crowded shelves as far as the ceiling, hung a moment, and then crawled round the walls and over the faces of the old maps till the gas was reached and lit, when it contracted suddenly and shrank into a corner; and as Julian watched it, he had the sensation of having experienced the moment before—it seemed perfectly familiar. He had stood in a sort of dream, hardly seeing the old man's yellow cheek and shabby shoulder, illuminated by the match, although his eyes were fixed upon them, and only when the whole figure was revealed in the glare of the gas did the sensation pass away.

In all his subsequent visits he never saw another salesman, and during his third visit he learned that the old man was Joshua Crookby himself—the name was over the door—and that he had inherited the business from his father. His fancy for the old man was such that, his discovery of him having taken place in the early days of his renewed acquaintance with Armathwaite, he brought Cecil there one morning, but the two men became jealous of each other's bargains, and each returned alone.

He made his subsequent pilgrimage to see if he could procure a copy of a poem which he knew to be out of

Digitized by Google

print, to give a woman whom he was trying to please, and he walked into Crookby's wondering if the woman could appreciate it and his ideas on it, and if he would give her his own copy should it prove impossible to find another—a question which was soon very definitely raised in his mind by Crookby, who declared he had no knowledge of the poem.

"I had such hopes of you, Crookby! But we must be patient. . . . That last purchase of mine was a very lucky one, I must tell you."

"Was it, Mr. Eames? Well, it is all a question of belief, sir; like religion, I take it."

Their voices awoke a sound in the inner part of the shop, and Julian turned, and at sight of the woman who was just appearing out of the shadows he experienced one of the greatest starts of surprise any woman had ever been able to give him. She had a book in her hand, and after a hesitation came forward, not looking at him, as if not aware of his presence.

"I will take this," she said to Crookby.

Julian moved aside, watching her closely, and as her eyes were roving they met his figure, but met it like an obstacle, without recognition of an individual. They were eyes placed far apart, large and full of light, but, apparently, vague and unseeing too; for though he was quite close to her they would not take him in, and he was obliged to think of some expedient to make her see.

He looked at Crookby, raising his eyebrows, as if to say, "Do remember the humanities and say something!" because a word from the bookseller might have helped him wonderfully; but the old man was ironically counting his change, and the idea of speaking to her under a pretext was instantly abandoned. She was not the kind of woman to whom one could ever speak casually.

She took her change and started to count it, fumbled a little in an exquisite awkwardness, flushed a little, as he saw well for the light was on her, and finally dropped all the money into her purse without counting the rest. Then she inclined her head in a little bow to old Crookby,

Digitized by Google

and, as Julian opened the door for her, she gave just the same slight, wordless inclination to him, and went out.

He looked round, and quickly asked:

"Have you ever seen that lady before? Who is she?"

"That lady, Mr. Eames? She was here the other day with your friend Mr. Armathwaite. I sent two books to her house."

"Then you must know her name," said Julian, impatient. "What is it?"

"I don't remember. But she lives in a convent, I think."

"Is," said Julian, thrilling suddenly—"is her name *Benwell*—Mrs. Benwell?"

"Yes, I remember now it is. You are quite right—that is her name."

Julian stood for a moment, lost in amazement. That Mrs. Benwell? That the actress in Carfrae's play? That the woman whom Cecil so familiarly spoke of as Blanche, whom he, Julian, had wanted, in an idle curiosity, to meet, whom he had heard of with amusement, and thought of with a shrug? A woman at first sight of whom he had started, and not because of mere loveliness, but a certain precious delicacy, a Madonna-like radiance and abstraction as she appeared out of the inner shadows of the shop. And for all that she was an actress whom Cecil had discovered! He could not recover from his surprise.

All the evening he kept remembering that beautiful face, and after dinner, instead of going home, he went to Cecil's flat.

Cecil was out, but the man told him Mr. Armathwaite had said he would be home early that night, which disposed him to wait, and in a few minutes he heard Cecil's latchkey.

"My dear fellow, this is truly luck! I had no idea you would be in till the small hours."

They sat down to smoke, and while they talked he saw signs of fatigue on the insignificant, mask-like face before

Digitized by Google

him, and wondered if the hour were propitious for mentioning Mrs. Benwell. He had decided not to do so when Cecil began speaking of Carfrae.

"Have you seen him to-day? Oddly enough, after our conversation of the other afternoon, I met Mrs. Benwell—or, rather, saw her. You remember how I said I wished to meet her."

Cecil quickly looked up. For several weeks now he had wanted Julian to meet Blanche, to gain in importance himself through this connection with her, and when he heard that Julian had met her without him he was disturbed. He felt angry that they had not met through him.

"Where did you see her?"

"At Crookby's. She was in the shop, but only for a few minutes, and when she went out I asked the old man who she was. He said she had gone there with you the other day. He could not remember her name, but I felt it must be Mrs. Benwell."

"There is certainly no one like her."

Julian could see, as Cecil leaned over to the ash-tray, that he looked almost sullen.

"I am sure of it," he answered and, by a delicate modulation of the voice expressing admiration of his friend's taste as well as of her, he observed: "She is a very beautiful woman."

As soon as Julian had mentioned Blanche, Cecil had wanted to ask him what he thought of her, yet when he said she was a very beautiful woman the disturbance in Cecil's mind was increased a hundredfold. If Julian had not found her beautiful it would have worked havoc with his own opinions; but for Julian to find her "very beautiful," and to say it in that tone of respect, made her at once so much more desirable to him that his pleasure in Julian's respect was overshot, and he became jealous. He no longer wanted anyone to find her very beautiful. And Julian felt he had said too much, so, rising to examine it, he remarked upon the charm of a Persian miniature of Vishnu's peacocks on the wall, after which he added:

Digitized by Google

"And now I really must be going."

But when he no longer spoke of Blanche Cecil was disappointed.

"Did you say anything to Mrs. Benwell?"

"How could I, my dear fellow? There was no one to introduce me."

Reaction with Cecil was rapid; his pride had again reasserted itself, and with an air of proprietorship he answered kindly: "I really must introduce you very soon."

"She is not on the stage at present, or I would have seen her. Has she acted much before?"

"Only in the provinces once, a six months' tour. Now she gives recitations at concerts, and sometimes in private houses—whenever she can."

"She needs to make money, does she?"

"She has adopted a niece of hers, a little girl of seven or eight. But when she has just enough for them to live on she is satisfied. She goes to Mass every morning. People who go to Mass every morning," he said languidly, "are content to be fed by ravens."

Julian forgot his tact.

"My dear Cecil, one usually asks oneself who is the raven."

Armathwaite seemed about to answer and then remained silent, and Julian knew, suddenly, that he had sacrificed to his habit of glib cynicism a reverence he ought to have felt. Retreating from his own sense of discomfort, he again spoke of other things. . . . When finally he rose to go, Cecil had lost all shadow of resentment, and accompanied him to the door, talking so much that they stood on the landing for another five minutes.

"Look here, Julian, Mrs. Benwell is reciting Thursday afternoon at Mrs. James's house—a woman who, under the plea of charity, gets artists for almost nothing and her house known at the same time. Do you want to go? I can give you a ticket."

They had rung for the lift, and as Julian sank downwards in it Cecil's voice called after him:

Digitized by Google

"At three o'clock, then; two hundred and one, Portman Square."

Julian was there punctually, feeling a certain excitement. To meet a woman who attracted him was always an excitement and one that he liked to push to its utmost limit, so that it was never a mild anticipation with him but always an emotion when he expected to see her come into the room, or when, on entering himself, he hoped to find her there before him. He had once said: "It is extraordinary how much one can care about a woman one does not care for!" and as he turned into Portman Square the pleasure he experienced was at once acute and familiar.

A few carriages were driving up to the door but he knew none of the people who stepped out of them, and no one spoke to him as he went up the handsome staircase. At the top of it the mistress of the house greeted him with an effusive manner and absent-minded eyes straying beyond him, and he went into a drawing-room smiling at the nature of the entertainment.

The room was L-shaped, and he found himself in the broader arm of it; a platform was raised against one wall, and the rest of the space was filled with gilt chairs already moved into confusion by an audience that consisted nearly entirely of women. The murky light from outside showed up the gilt brackets, the coloured French engravings, and the pretentious furniture. He disliked the room at once. Picking up a programme he saw there was to be singing and piano-playing, and two recitations by "Miss Blanche Benwell," and he was wondering if she had already arrived when he caught sight of Cecil threading his way towards him.

"If you want to meet Mrs. Benwell, Julian, she is in the next room, and would like me to introduce you."

He followed at once, but on the threshold, after the *portière* had fallen behind him, he paused for a moment. There was a lighted lamp on the middle table and standing beside it, in the odd light created by the flame and the window, Mrs. Benwell was alone, holding a bouquet

Digitized by Google

loosely in her two hands which were dropped before her against her black dress. She was looking away, out of the window, as motionless and yet as lightly poised as a flower on a windless morning, but turning her head as the two men came in Julian caught her attention and seemed to hold it fast.

His pause before shaking hands was noticeable, and perhaps it was his intense consciousness of her that was communicated and awoke an echo in herself; she continued to look at him as if fascinated. . . . But that attention was elusive, and he could not be sure afterwards that it had not been the same vagueness he had seen in her before.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Benwell," he said, "and to be about to hear you recite." He could not speak naturally with Cecil beside him, and his words struck him as ridiculous. Also it was irritating to have this feeling of rivalry afloat between them, but he asked himself what he could have said to her even had he and she been alone.

She was speaking to Cecil while he wondered, and he tried to read the meaning of the looks between them: his critical and proprietary, hers certainly conciliating. She was saying that she had changed her choice of a recitation, and then she asked his opinion and appeared doubtful of what she had done. Julian did not know what sort of an intimacy it was that allowed Cecil to question her and finally decide her ultimate choice was the best, and yet he could not fail to see there was far less intimacy in Cecil's manner when he spoke to her than when he spoke of her.

He grew impatient, and wanted her eyes to turn back to him, especially as he saw by the slight commotion at the door that the other artists had arrived, and that the performance was about to begin. Mrs. James brought in a stout woman in a striped silk dress that accentuated the too salient curves of her figure, and with her a man of the tenor type, his hair brushed up in a bristling mop above his forehead and a manner which at the furthest

Digitized by Google

distance suggested compliments. The noise of voices gathered, and distracted by the talking Mrs. Benwell became silent, but Julian could think of nothing better to say than to ask her if she were ever nervous before going on the stage.

"Oh no," she answered, standing in a quiet attitude, her flowers hanging in one hand and with the other leaning on the window-sill. "I don't do it very well, and so I don't think about it beforehand. It would make me nervous if I did."

Her answer charmed him, and he felt sure that if she did not do well he would not like her less for it, whereas with another woman, a more self-confident, aggressive woman, he might have been disappointed to the loss of all interest. With almost a shock of pleasure in her simplicity he compared her to the other artist in the room, who was preening herself in her striped silk gown and preparing the effect she was about to produce.

Then the braying voice of the tenor, who had been steadily talking, abruptly ceased, and there was a welcome silence until the striped songstress ascended the stage and the music began. Julian could not help smiling at the picture she made, the music roll held a little out from her, her back arched and her head thrown back, and he leaned over to Mrs. Benwell and whispered:

"I have thought of what she reminds me. The wings in her hat put me in mind of a Walküre, and the whole could be an excellent parody on Wagner—a fat Walküre rushing through the clouds on a zebra."

He was rewarded by hearing her laugh, and as she tried to control it he realized that she was young. Up to that moment he had not thought of any age in connection with her, but when she laughed he decided she must be twenty-six or seven.

The second item on the programme was a duet between the Wagner parody and the tenor, and as they mounted the last crescendo in one united shout Julian saw Mrs. Benwell gather up her bouquet and prepare to go.

"Is it your turn now?" he whispered.

Digitized by Google

She gave him a little smile, but he could not overcome his own feeling of nervousness. After all, it would be a disappointment if she recited badly, and he did not want to be disappointed; and then he liked her enough already to feel sure he would be sorry for her if she failed.

During the languid applause for the vociferous duet he and Cecil found chairs for themselves in the audience, and they had not been seated long when she appeared, mounting the two steps of the stage slowly and yet smoothly. Having laid her flowers on the piano and moved forward she paused, and Julian thought she was about to begin when Mrs. James rose in the front row and spoke to her, a few words which he could not hear and for which she herself had to bend her head. Then she smiled a little, just as she had smiled at him.

With the delay and doubt he grew more and more nervous, but the intermission had been made to allow a footman to light the candles in sconces on the walls, as the day was fast darkening in a fog. A yellow light seemed to float round her, and her figure gained in importance when the shadows were dispelled, but the illumination was soft, and did not destroy a certain poetry of outline.

The servant left the room, and still she paused, while he thought he could hear his heart beat. Then in a rather low voice she gave the title of her piece:

" 'Hide-and-Seek.' "

He did not know what it meant at first. He had not formed any idea of what her reportoire would be, and yet he had not expected anything as childlike. It was the story, in verse, of an old woman bedridden with age and her little crippled grandson, who, unable either of them to move, played hide-and-seek by imagining the place in house or garden where they would have liked to hide, imagining the excitement of choice, and the pursuit, and then finding each other with guesses. And she did not so much recite as speak her lines, looking at the faces in the audience as though she were explaining something to them, as though she were trying to tell them

Digitized by Google

something. There was no conscious pathos in her voice; at moments it was almost joyous, and again it halted a little when she said:

> " 'That old, old, old, old woman
> And the boy with the twisted knee.' "

Her simplicity touched him afresh, and her voice, which was not professionally trained or capable of many modulations and shades of meaning, seemed to him the most exquisitely moving thing he had ever heard.

She made her bow, and he glanced sharply at the faces round him. They seemed surprised, there was a good deal of clapping, and yet with a sweeping contempt he knew that no one but he had really understood.

He rose and went back to the artists' room without waiting for Cecil, who had been engaged, against his will, in conversation by a well-dressed girl; but he found Mrs. James already before him, complimenting and thanking. " Charming !" he heard her say. " Thank you so much ! Quite, quite charming !" Her eyes wandered, and she left Blanche's side for the more profitable occupation of welcoming an arrival.

" How can I tell you," Julian said, " what this has been to me ? I felt as though you were telling me about yourself."

He afterwards came to know that her pauses were more characteristic than speech, and even in this first meeting he thought he divined what she wished to say when she herself was unable to say it. She had not known how to answer her hostess, and now, while he, too, was praising her, she stood looking at him in a radiant silence.

His praise was delicious because she did not understand it. It made her instantly ask herself a question; she had never told anyone about herself. There did not seem anything to tell. What could he mean ?

He watched her reflecting on his words, but in another moment he saw Cecil approaching rapidly. " Why cannot he keep away ?" he exclaimed, exaggerating his note of despair.

Digitized by Google

And she answered: "He is so kind! I am sure he has come to say something to cheer me."

"He is so kind!" The words struck him as amusing in their inadequacy. Was she, after all, an actress in her personal life, whereas, as far as he could judge, on the stage she could seem only herself? If she were a natural actress that "He is so kind!" was consummate; but if she were what she seemed in her recitation she was divinely, incredibly innocent. As for Cecil, he could not be sure that he was in love with her. He was paying her every attention, but that did not mean he was in love with her. He was the type that liked being seen with actresses, and Julian was made uncomfortable only when he remembered that Mrs. Benwell did not yet deserve the name of actress. It was Carfrae and Cecil that were going to make her one.

Her second recitation brought no disillusionment, and he listened with an intense concentration to the end. The room was quite still, and the little drop of her voice with the last words come to him in a hush that lasted for a second after she had made her bow, but his mind had been diverted from all thought of the audience by a sudden uncertainty about herself.

He could not tell if she were in mourning or not. Her black clothes were somewhat shabby but perfectly graceful, and her hat was indefinite; but to have looked fashionable would have put her out of keeping with herself. Again he wondered if it were mourning she was wearing. . . . He speculated upon her husband, and did not know if it would not have been better had she been a widow. Probably she had married at eighteen, because she had been forced to it. What was her story? A mother, a little sister perhaps, poverty that made life at home a burden? He must find out what her husband had been like.

The entertainment was over. She was speaking, or rather listening again, to women who idly wished to meet her and murmur inanities as they passed, and as he waited in the little crowd he knew that in a constant

Digitized by Google

undercurrent of thought he had been hoping he might take her home in a hansom. He feared such a thing would be impossible, but he kept close to her on the way downstairs and managed to ask her how she was going to get home. Kensington was a long distance from Portman Square. She hesitated, and he was sure she did not like to say she was going with Cecil, whereas in reality she was wanting in the moral courage to say she would go by bus.

It sounded so absurd—to go by bus !

After hesitating she could not bring herself to say it, and she asked him to see if he could get her a hansom. Both men remained to help her into it, and Cecil gave the address to the driver without attempting to go with her.

With one accord they said good-bye to each other after she had gone, for at that moment neither wanted the company of the other.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER III

JULIAN could not now forgive himself for having paid so little attention to the scenario of Carfrae's play when it had been given him to read. Cecil had got it from Carfrae on some pretext, and, positively commanding secrecy, had passed it on to Julian for one evening only. Julian had looked some of it over, had not taken the trouble to discover any particular significance in that outlined grouping of characters, but, just noticing one or two things about it that struck him as original, had let it go at that—though he said much more than that to Cecil. It was during Mrs. Benwell's recitation that the play for the first time occurred to him as something of interest and importance, and, wondering about her as he walked away from Portman Square, he remembered that Carfrae had said she had given him an idea. More, Carfrae had said he had written the play around her! Did that not mean one might be able to find her in the play? Would one find her as she appeared to him, Julian? for did Carfrae see her as he did? He remembered that the play was called *Catherine Place*. That was no help. . . . What he had noticed first was the simplicity of background in the piece, and the lack of ornament and explanation in the presentation of the characters; there had been a starkness about the outline that was unusual. And, reconstructing the story for himself, he remembered that no love-interest had centred about the principal figure, and that the man in the play was her brother. That was strange! Brother and sister. . . . What was it that had suggested that to Carfrae? Was it that her life had really been influenced by a brother? How much he wanted to know about her life, and how mysterious it had seemed to him when she drove off through the thick

Digitized by Google

yellow twilight, to conditions and surroundings that he could not picture to himself! He must get hold of the scenario again. It seemed to him that in the scenario the central figure was at once the most insisted upon and the most negative in the group; all the other characters were far more positive and clear. The emotions of the play took place about her and apart from her, and he could not remember a single action of hers that really shaped the story. Yet the story was dominated by her, but dominated by an influence rather than activity. And though the soul of Carfrae's work had escaped him, he had not forgotten how to that influence there belonged an atmosphere of great purity and delicacy; and that, to him, was of more importance than all the rest of the play. But for a second he asked himself if Carfrae had taken for his heroine only the effect produced by Mrs. Benwell's beauty, or her real character.

The idea of the play interested him extremely. In the middle of a dinner-party he remembered how it had been referred to by Armathwaite and Carfrae as "the Comedy," and he had to pause in his conversation while he asked himself how that could be. He never thought of it as a comedy, for how could she fit into one? Was she not rather a creature for an idyll? Her colouring had the fragility of early flowers, pale primroses for her hair, and white blossoms. She was easy to idealize.

And then he began looking about for Carfrae, and he asked several people if they knew him. He did not want to meet him again through Armathwaite if he could help it, as Armathwaite would spoil everything with the irritating claims of his egotism. And how she appeared to Armathwaite didn't matter to him in the least, for to Cecil's mental operations he was more than indifferent; but he thought with curiosity of seeing her reflected in the author's mind. He admired and secretly envied all creative power, for he himself could absorb and criticize, but never create; but in this case the cause of his interest lay in the fact that through Carfrae he thought he would see Blanche.

Digitized by Google

It was with almost a start that he recognized Carfrae in a certain Mrs. Hesketh's drawing-room one afternoon that he called there, and he drew near at once, hurried by his desire to efface their former antagonism from Carfrae's memory and remake the acquaintance.

There were four other people at Mrs. Hesketh's that afternoon, and their hostess was countenancing a demonstration in spirit-writing. Two ladies, one of whom Julian knew, were seated at a small table littered with innumerable sheets of paper, and Mrs. Hesketh on a far sofa was talking earnestly to a middle-aged man while he listened with an air of admiration. Her eyes were fixed upon him, and at times she touched his knee with her hand.

Julian knew her ways by that time and they did not surprise him, but, though delighted, he was rather surprised that Carfrae should be there. From a little distance the dramatist was watching the spirit-writing with which the two ladies were occupied at the table, and Julian went up to him, shook hands with a reserved cordiality, and then watched with him in silence.

One of the two, a Lady Castle that he had met before, had placed her fingers upon the wrist of the other woman, who was holding a pencil in that same hand, and the pencil was travelling over a sheet of paper with rapid but undecided movements.

"What is your name?" asked Lady Castle, who was a large woman, rather flushed, of the spirit they had invoked. And then after a few seconds she looked up and exclaimed, "Myra!"

"Myra!" repeated a young man sitting beside her on the edge of his chair, and then he gazed severely at Julian, who was smiling.

"Myra," said the woman in whose hand the pencil was writing, and they all three looked at each other.

"This is very wonderful," murmured Julian to Carfrae. "Have you seen it before?"

"Never!"

"No, no," Lady Castle was saying in a firm, patient

Digitized by Google

voice, as the pencil made unintelligible trails across the page. "We asked '*Where do you live?*'" and they all three sat perfectly still.

"*Where do you live?*" asked Lady Castle, in a louder, still more patient voice.

The pencil began to write again, and when it had finished, she read out in a tone of triumph: "Patmos!"

"Patmos!" said the other, who had closed her eyes; "where is Patmos?"

"She doesn't even know where it is!" cried Lady Castle; and the young man said, "Extraordinary!" and glared at Julian.

"I once assisted at a séance that had some very curious consequences," said Julian, as he and Carfrae stood by the fireplace; and he started upon an anecdote during the telling of which, not to seem too eager, he divided his attention between the other people in the room and the man beside him.

Carfrae listened politely, smiling from time to time, but making no comments. Although Julian was not too cordial Carfrae did not know why he was taking the trouble to tell an anecdote at all. But when it was finished he replied with an observation on the performance they were witnessing, after which they stood talking in the intervals of looking.

When Carfrae said he must go it seemed quite natural that Julian should propose going with him.

Mrs. Hesketh, who had noticed none of her visitors that afternoon but the middle-aged man on the sofa, narrowed her eyes at Carfrae, and then pressed Julian's hand in both of hers.

"Come again, Julian," she said, and her eyes promised him he would be noticed the next time he came.

"This will make copy for you!" he said to Carfrae as they left the house, and he tried to guide him towards the desired subject; but when he finally mentioned the play he found they were opposite his club, which had been his alleged destination.

"Do come in!" he said. "It is so late that we

Digitized by Google

might have dinner in a few minutes. There was something I wanted to ask you."

Carfrae was about to decline when the last part of Julian's invitation, coming as a surprise, made him pause. He was quite sure Eames wanted to speak to him of Blanche, and as soon as this occurred to him he accepted. Julian had not expected that he would.

A little later they were seated at a table in the corner of the dining-room, and, having accepted Eames's hospitality, Carfrae was making an effort to be agreeable. The two had certain sympathies in common, though they were not sympathetic, and their talk was smooth, upon topics any two men may share; during the fish course Julian accomplished at last the desired transition.

"I was very much interested to hear you were writing a play, Carfrae, and I wanted to ask you more about it the other day, but Armathwaite was there, and we hardly had an opportunity to talk of it. I was also very much interested to meet Mrs. Benwell—for I have met her at last, and have had the opportunity of hearing her recite."

He was formal, and Carfrae expressionless, as the reason for the dinner, the reason for the cordiality, and attempts at conversation, was finally brought forward and recognized by both. Julian had a sudden desire to laugh when he remembered how they had last talked about the Comedy—in fact, had not been able to talk at all, because of a sort of constitutional hostility. He was sure Carfrae remembered in the same way, and if they both had laughed they might almost have understood each other.

"Cecil Armathwaite tells me you are making a character study of her. I assure you I will keep my own counsel about this, for I can quite see you don't want it repeated. You yourself told me she had inspired you with an idea. Is the plot her life-story? And yet I can scarcely believe it could be that."

Carfrae rapidly reviewed his reasons for telling Eames something about the play, and found that they were good.

Digitized by Google

He knew that Eames had read the scenario—he had guessed it earlier from an over-cautious remark of Cecil's—but he was not sorry he had. The play put Blanche in the light in which he wished everyone to see her. Before he met Julian Eames he had made Armathwaite agree with him that her influence on the play should never be mentioned; but when he met Eames, when he saw Armathwaite assuming an air of proprietorship towards her, and Julian Eames smiling at it and desiring to meet her, he changed his mind. Seeing that she needed an explanation in certain people's eyes, he decided that the play was the simplest way of effecting one. He further decided that he would continue to confide in Julian, whose friendliness made this easy for him.

In one way he did not like Julian any better for this sudden change of manner, and yet in another way he admired him for it; he admired him for the cleverness with which he could adapt himself to the occasion and not overdo it, and he was quite willing to admit that Julian's methods had been perfect. And with barely a pause, he answered: "*She* is my idea."

It was evident that he had made up his mind to speak, for, settling his elbows on the table, he looked at Julian, and his face declared itself, as it were, and showed its character. The thick brows and somewhat heavy eyes commanded.

The sombre walls of the room gloomed at them, but the glass over a portrait caught the reflection of a red-shaded candle and flashed a high light in the close, oppressive background; while now and then among the handful of diners some detail caught the attention sharply—a man's face in a fit of laughter, or a waiter's intent, suspended watchfulness, or, again, a mere glitter of the old-fashioned silver. In the same way Carfrae's change of expression rose significant above their laboured, methodical talk.

"I knew Mrs. Benwell before; several years ago, before she married."

A question rose hotly to Julian's lips, but he repressed it, and this Carfrae appreciated.

Digitized by Google

"I did not see her again till the other day, three months ago, that is, and I had only heard of her indirectly all that time: that she divorced her husband, who was a Protestant, I believe, had no children, was living alone. In short, to explain, I had not kept up with her, and met her again to my surprise."

Is he, too, in love with her? Julian was thinking.

"But before I met her again I must tell you I had known Armathwaite. We fell to talking, he and I. I had written some plays and was, as you must know, an unsuccessful playwright."

He lifted his elbows for a plate to be removed, then drank, hiding a one-sided smile.

"Armathwaite was—interested."

Again they had the same thought, an identical one of Cecil, and shared it with a look, at which the atmosphere between them grew lighter.

"He told me the stage was a great interest to him, almost a hobby. I've noticed since that he knows most of the actors, and some of our best playwrights. But that did not satisfy him. He wanted to be connected with the stage. The idea grew."

"It started at the performance of *A Doll's House*," Julian was about to say, but he stopped.

"He wanted to have in his hands the producing of a play. He wanted to hire a playhouse and get together his own company."

Julian nodded. He knew all this so well that it was beginning to bore him.

"I tried to dissuade him; in fact, I paid no attention to the idea at first; but one day he said to me, squarely, he wanted me to write a play that he could produce. He said he had the money. I consented to do the best I could."

He did not mention his ambitions. . . . Julian noticed this.

"But I had to consult him—about the plot, the characters, the climax, the idea for each piece of 'business.' And then I met Mrs. Benwell. She was

Digitized by Google

reciting at a charity performance to which I went by the merest chance, to please a friend. She was an inspiration—revolutionized my whole play, which was being squeezed dry as an orange. I told Armathwaite I could not write my play unless she acted in it, and, of course, he must meet Mrs. Benwell, to see what I meant. He understood. At least, he said he did."

He was trying, and in a manner succeeding, to appear to explain himself, and not her.

"My idea is to produce merely herself, her own looks and her own personality. You may think it an extremely bad way of writing a play, and I'm not sure I don't agree with you. But that is my way of writing. It is like painting perhaps: changing continually with the changes of the model till at last one expression is fixed, crystallized, as it were. Armathwaite seemed to understand, after he met Mrs. Benwell."

"She," said Julian, looking right at Carfrae in an effort at straightforwardness—"she appeals to the imagination."

"That's it exactly—she appeals to the imagination. I have not told her what I am doing, and she is not the sort of woman to guess. Once she said, when she had read the scenario of the first act: 'Why, she goes to Mass every morning! I am glad.' That was of the heroine. And people don't recognize themselves. They would not see their own resemblance in a picture unless they had been all posed for a portrait. Mrs. Benwell isn't an actress, but, as I realized when I heard her recite, she has the gift of being able to remain herself. That is a great talent in itself, and not everyone has it. She has it, I think in a supreme degree, and that is all I want in her. People say that no one can be natural on the stage—and of course one cannot consciously act one's own life in the face of the footlights. But the footlights may make one drop all that one has carefully learnt, all one's 'business'—to be, at the last, merely oneself and not an actor at all. And that is the effect I am writing for. It is an idea.... The footlights will make her

Digitized by Google

only simpler. I have seemed to see it in that way. I may be wrong."

There was a silence, and he shrugged his shoulders. Then: "In a way I have proved it. When I first heard her recite she gave us Browning's 'Incident in the French Camp.' If we let her she would do Lady Macbeth. You can guess how badly she did a dramatic piece; she never ceased to be herself, and only her beauty saved her. Then I asked her to learn those little verses you heard her say the other day, 'Hide-and-Seek,' and she was just as ready to say them as the others. She trusts other people implicitly, and lacks confidence in herself. . . . She was herself again, but with what a difference of effect!"

He stopped, unwilling to speak more of her to a man he did not like.

"But there is hardly a man or woman in England who will appreciate her! It is only her beauty they will notice. I saw them the other afternoon—their gaping mouths!"

"What does it matter?" answered Carfrae, carried away. "I don't need applause for her. I don't want a run to my play. Just to see her one night in it, and remember it afterwards. Then I will try something else if necessary."

They had lingered so long over their port that the room was empty. Julian pushed back his chair.

"Just her personality, as you say——" he began, but words would not come to him, and he forgot the questions he had meant to put in thinking of new things.

He was obliged to rise, regretful, fearing that the thread of their talk was snapped, and that in the smoking-room they could not recapture it; and, sure enough, Carfrae accepting a cigar was an automaton, a man completely retired into his shell. Yet Julian tried again.

"What does Cecil say to an experiment that may not be successful? For you say you do not mind if it is successful or not."

"He is satisfied. He wishes Mrs. Benwell to act in

Digitized by Google

the play he produces at all costs," answered Carfrae, and he did not see what he had done—that, having made his effort to set her clearly before Julian's eyes, he veiled her again with just one sentence. She must be in the play that Cecil produced—at all costs! It looked as if he were producing her, and the play only on account of her. The very idea of Cecil annoyed Julian.

He came back to the smoking-room after Carfrae had left, thinking it over, but no veil could long obscure her personality. He knew, without the corroboration of Carfrae's play, that she was good, and she was simple. She thought Cecil kind, perhaps he himself seemed kind to her! She did not think of her recitations beforehand because she did not do them very well and would get nervous if she dwelt on them. If a man looked at her in a shop she flushed. That reminded him, he had not spoken to her yet of having met her at Crookby's, nor had he asked her whether she recognized him when she saw him again in Portman Square. There was already so much he wanted to say to her!

There was now a zest to his friendship with Cecil which there had never been before, especially when he saw, after their dinner at the club, how little hope there was of meeting her through Carfrae. Interest in other people was his pose, and although it was not always insincere it often showed itself from force of habit. It was only in the very beginning that Cecil had amused him, and yet—and this was lucky, as he was destined to become Julian's sole link with a beautiful woman—Cecil had been kept as a friend even when he was sometimes a good deal of a bore. Julian thought it very lucky, when his patient listening was finally rewarded. For Cecil at last was led to suggest a theatre-party for Mrs. Benwell—just themselves and a couple of their more Bohemian acquaintances. It was quickly got up, at a time when Carfrae happened to be out of town or inaccessible; at any rate he paid no attention to a telegram. At this Julian was delighted. He thought that Cecil would be

Digitized by Google

obliged to devote his attention to his other guests, a celebrated cartoonist and his wife, while he would at last have an opportunity to speak to Blanche; but as it turned out they were in a box, and during the first act he did not even sit beside her.

She was the last to arrive, and though he would have liked to wait for her with Cecil in the lobby he was sent to take care of Mr. and Mrs. Berardelli, who were alone. The curtain had gone up when the door at the back of the box opened and she entered. Murmuring her excuses, she seemed hardly to know Mrs. Berardelli in her flutter of contrition at being so late. But after she had taken her seat Julian could watch her in quiet, silhouetted in the light of the stage against the darkness beyond her; leaning her arm on the cushioned ledge of the box she looked over, as it were, into a gulf that startled her. As she turned her head he could see the classic line of it, and of her hair, loosely drawn into a Grecian knot. Every detail made him long to talk to her.

Even during the *entr'acte* he could merely watch; watch her wide, mild gaze that rested first upon Mr. Berardelli—who was a fat little man sunk in his chair, only his sly eyes moving in his large, blank face—and then upon Mrs. Berardelli, who was also fat, but somnolent, and who spoke with an inert complacency. In both the Berardellis all the usual moulding and movements that give human expression were absent, and yet the lack of expression in each was strikingly individual. Julian, too, was almost fascinated by their triumphant grossness.

It was only during the last act that chairs were moved, and he found himself next to Blanche.

"Do you see yourself already on the stage?" he asked, "receiving ovations?"

But as he spoke he wondered if she would ever receive ovations, and doubted if her fairness and fineness would ever create an effect. And yet how enchanting to know that a play was growing around her! A piece of literature that might be great, though not necessarily ever a

Digitized by Google

success, and that was being built upon her stillness, her elusiveness and yet lack of variety, her lovely, unexplained fixity. A beautiful thing, he thought, need never change its aspect. She was beautiful, and to look at her would always be enough. Why did he wish to speak to her? Yet he was urged on to seek greater satisfaction than mere looking, and his conversation at supper was all to that end.

"Let me send you the book as you have not read it. May I? Or rather"—he lowered his voice for fear that the others, even in the clatter of the crowded restaurant, might hear. "May I bring it to you? May I come and see you?"

His face, his eagerness were wonderful to her.

"But," she said—"but—I live in a convent! Do you wish to come and see me in a convent?"

He did not answer. All answers would have been conventional. He looked at her.

"If you like," she said, "you can come and see me. It is allowed."

He thought she seemed a little disturbed.

"I am afraid you will find the convent parlour a very ugly place. And I hear your rooms are so beautiful."

"Who told you that, I wonder?"

"Mr. Armathwaite—even before I met you. I had heard a great deal about you before I met you at Mrs. James's. I felt then that I knew you already. Do you know—it was almost as if I had seen you before."

"But you had seen me before. I had seen you. I knew who you were. It was for that reason I went to Mrs. James's——"

"Seen you! But where?"

She hung on his answer, and impatient though he was at the thought of interruptions there was an added attraction to him in talking thus intimately in the midst of a crowd. Cecil and the Berardellis were ignored, seemed leagues away. The mirrors of the restaurant indefinitely multiplied a flashing impression of amuse-

Digitized by Google

ment and luxury; but for a moment, in spite of all, they were creating an isolation just for their two selves.

"It was at old Joshua Crookby's, the bookseller's. Don't you remember? But why should you? I did nothing for you; there was nothing for me to do but look at you and hope you would not mind. I asked him who you were when you went out of the shop. We were in it together only a few minutes, but because of that I went to Mrs. James's. Why else should I have gone?"

"Oh!" she said, and looked down, and he wondered why her eyes had emptied of light.

Her evident disappointment was so unexpected that he was in an instant full of curiosity, and just as his interest in what she could say became as great as his interest in her beauty the party was broken up. He could hardly believe his ill-luck when she rose and showed him the conversation was over by holding out her hand; but as he took it he asked her if he could come and see her the following Tuesday. She stood hesitating, pulling her long black gloves between her fingers, and again he appreciated the contrast between her gaudy background and herself. But so undecided was she he felt that in another moment she might ask his advice as to whether she ought to let him come or not. Then "Yes, yes," she said suddenly, quickly, and turned to follow Mrs. Berardelli across the room. His eyes lost her among the other women.

In the dressing-room she stood with her cloak in her hands long after the attendant had given it to her. She had felt it was mysterious that she should know his face the day he was introduced to her, the day of her recitation, and she had left Portman Square in a sort of trepidation, wondering at the familiarity that his features, the look of his eyes especially, already had for her. And it was only because she had seen him before. She could not remember the incident of the shop, yet to have seen him before with her actual eyes robbed their later meeting of its strangeness. In her disappointment she forgot the disturbing fact that he would be the third man in

Digitized by Google

two months who had come to see her, and the twinge of conscience that her permission had given her.

"Tell me when you have made up your mind," said Mrs. Berardelli, and Blanche gave a start as though she had been rudely awakened.

Julian had not been to a convent since the afternoon, years before, on which he had gone with his mother to pay a visit to a little cousin of his, who was at school in the Convent of the Assumption. He was eighteen, she was seventeen. He had seen her at a dance the previous Christmas, and an expression on her face, as of wonder, of incredulousness almost, at the enthralling prospect of life, awoke in a moment all his tender fancies. Girls at that time were just beginning to make him conscious of himself. He hardly knew as yet if it were their eyes or his own reflection in them that set him dreaming. They were kind to him, and yet never kind enough, and in his moods of despondency their words and looks, each of which he weighed so carefully, seemed always cold and even frequently unkind. It was because he did not really know what his little cousin had meant that he manœuvred to see her again; but it took a week of edging round the subject before he gathered up sufficient courage to say it would be nice to give her a little surprise visit at school. His *amour-propre* suffered sorely from the fear his mother would guess the feeling that prompted him to the suggestion, for at that age he felt that to show preference for one girl was in some way beneath his dignity.

He remembered his efforts at conversation all the way thither in a hansom; he remembered dropping the fare in the gutter in his nervousness, and the wave of shame that prickled over his skin at that, as if every window in the austere, grey building were lined with amused and mocking nymphs.

A quiet nun, serenely habited, showed them into the parlour, and as he and his mother waited they heard the sound of conflicting pianos overhead. When the door-handle turned he had a catch in his throat. The little

Digitized by Google

cousin, in a dark uniform, came in very quickly, shut the door behind her with an "Oh!"—and the expression of her face was just the same, the same enraptured incredulity. They looked at each other furtively during the whole unsatisfactory, agonizing visit, pressed hands at the end with a regret as sharp as tears of disappointment, and parted, for her to cry and him darkly to hate his mother.

When they met again it was at her wedding.

He thought of these things when he went to call on Blanche, and he half expected to find her in the very same convent. But hers was not an educational establishment, but one that offered retirement to unattached ladies, and he was pleased by its situation as he approached it along the gardens of Scarsdale Terrace. It was in the most delightful part of Kensington, where one moved like a character in an old-fashioned novel, and the convent stood back in a little old-fashioned square.

The portress who let him into a circular hall, having first looked at him through the grating in the door, was pink-cheeked and wore her wimple with demureness, but he caught sight on the staircase that faced the front-door of a pair of stern eyes in the shadow of a veil. A nun had evidently paused to inspect whoever it was who had gained admittance, and in her rigid figure and in her eyes he could almost see fanaticism. That was imagination perhaps, but all the same he could not understand how any woman in the world supported life in such a place. How was it possible for Blanche?

Upon the dull-papered walls of the long, low parlour were pious prints and a picture of Leo XIII in pontifical robes. The ethereal face asked him a question above the lifted hand; but Julian, proud of his irreligion, shrugged and smiled—smiling still more as his attention passed to the photographs of a cardinal and two Monsignori on the chimneypiece, so sure was he of their worldliness or cynicism.

He then looked at the horsehair furniture and the

Digitized by Google

square of cheap Brussels carpet in the centre of the painted board floor; a horseshoe composed of half a dozen chairs and a sofa invited general conversation, and another row of chairs stood against the wall. He listened for the jingle of pianos he had half expected to hear, and instead became aware of the ticking of the clock. He was beginning to be very impatient when she came in.

He experienced the keenest pleasure in seeing her thus without a hat, for it gave him a sense of being at home with her when she sat down. She took her seat on a small sofa by the window, at the opposite end of the room to the horseshoe of chairs, and he near her, beside a table, forgetting the discomfort and lack of comeliness of their surroundings in having her like this at his ease. After his curiosity and baffled interest it was deep satisfaction, like drinking water on a dusty day. The repose of her hands folded in her lap, the shadows in her black dress, the rim of light on her fair hair—all, in a way, were enigmatic, and seemed to hide some secret of hers he longed to have revealed.

She thanked him for the book he had brought her, after which their talk ebbed a little.

"I hardly thought you would come—not many men, I think, would care to come to a convent. You see, it is very ugly."

"It is not ugly to me now. But if you think it is, why have you chosen to live here?"

"I have lived here four years. And I like it. The nuns are so kind, and there is a dear little chapel. But are you a Catholic?"

"I was—yes," he said, breaking off, "I am."

"I am so glad! Then you will understand. I will show you the chapel if you would like to see it—later. You see, when I began to live alone I wondered where I should go. My family would not take me in after—— But it is a long story."

"Tell me."

"They would not have anything to do with me after I

Digitized by Google

was converted—I am a convert—so I was very glad that I could be taken in by a convent. I was young, and I did not know where to go. I lived in a convent in the country first, and when I came to town I thought of going to the Carmelite House, but I liked this better. It is smaller. I always think of these convents as a sort of hostel for us unprofessed who live in them. I like the idea—the kind nuns preparing resting-places for us along our road."

She smiled, and then, when he thought she was about to tell him more, he found her fallen into what seemed a deep preoccupation.

"When did you become converted? Can you not tell me the story?"

"It was a long time ago—I was eighteen. I went to Rome with an aunt of mine, and there I fell ill, and they put me into the Convent of the Little Sisters of Mary, which was the only English hospital there. I had typhoid fever, and it took a long time. . . . Shall I really tell you about it?"

She looked at him, and as he sustained her look he felt they were coming nearer to each other. She broke the silence by saying in a low voice:

"I felt you were a Catholic."

There was another pause, but suddenly she began:

"When I first gained consciousness after the delirium and fever it was as if I had awakened in a new world, all strange, and I thought for a moment I had died, yet there was no peace in the place where I had come to. I was only afraid. It was at night; there was a little night-light on the floor, and the shadows were terrible. I began to speak, but I do not remember what I said—only I heard a voice answering me: 'Hush! it is all right, for the Blessed Virgin is watching over you.' At first I could not understand, but then I saw the sister coming towards my bed. I did not know then it was the Sister; she wore her night-nursing habit of white with a pale blue veil, and I thought it was the Blessed Virgin who had come to me, and I fell asleep."

Digitized by Google

She paused, waiting for Julian to speak or to exclaim over what she had said, which had been like the recital of a story that she knew by heart.

"I have often thought it must have been a miracle. When I got better I asked them if it was not the Blessed Virgin who had come to me that night, and the Sister told me she did not think an actual miracle had happened, but she was sure God had put the thought into my mind. And, after all, that is a miracle, isn't it? When I think of it, it seems wonderful to me."

"But was it all easy to you? Did faith come without a struggle?"

He could hardly believe that it was he himself who had spoken, but the words of a forgotten formula came to his lips before he remembered that such things had been, not only dead to him for years, but matters of derision and contempt. And yet to hear her brought old, gentle things back to his mind, so sweetly that he could not laugh at himself, and to speak to her otherwise would have been like shattering something infinitely precious, destroying a flower.

"Not quite without a struggle," she said, glancing down at her hands. And, looking up: "Do you remember, after I had recited, you said it was as if I had told you about myself? Well, I wonder if that was because it is really easy to tell you, or if it makes it easy for me now because you told me that?"

In a sudden heart-beat he thought she must realize how much she had confessed, but he found her waiting for his answer in a glowing silence, and then her question seemed the most natural in the world, and their interest in each other far too simple to be hid.

"It is because we must tell each other about ourselves, each about the other," he said, resting his arm upon the table between them and leaning forward towards her. "I felt that as soon as we met, that it was arranged, that we could not help ourselves."

"Then I need not be ashamed at having told you so much? After all, it is such a wonderful thing to talk

Digitized by Google

about the grace that has been vouchsafed to us. We should think of it continually."

He drew back a little, but in no other way did he show his disappointment.

"You asked me if faith came without a struggle. No, it did not, but that is another sign of grace. We should not be so grateful for it if we had not learnt to long for it. When I was convalescing," she said, resuming her narrative, and with her hands once more clasped on her knee, "I was allowed to sit on a balcony and look out over the Campagna. The convent is near one of the gates of Rome, and one can see over the Campagna as far as the Alban Hills, and as I looked I used to think of what the dear sisters told me, till the beautiful country continued the miracle that had been begun in my heart. There was the wall of another house not many feet away from one of my windows, and as I lay in bed I could see the morning sunshine creep along it as faith creeps over the ignorance of the world, and I was so happy—I was so happy it was really as if I had been born again, and all the past years were forgotten like a dream."

She was silent for several moments, without embarrassment.

"I cannot tell you all about it in one afternoon. If you care to hear about it I can tell you—but another day. I have told you so much for the first day. As you said, it is so easy to tell each other."

"You have felt that?" he said, quick to seize an opportunity. "Then that must mean that we are made to know each other. I felt it—I was sure if we had been left alone that first afternoon at Mrs. James's we could have talked of all those things that are usually so difficult to express. It would have been easy for me. And yet—am I not being vain? How do I know you would have wished to listen?"

"Have you not listened to me?" she asked.

For a moment he hardly knew how to answer.

"Everything," he said—"everything about yourself I

Digitized by Google

want to hear. From the first I heard of you, in that little poem you recited——"

"I have been puzzled at what you told me then. For what could I have told you? I was thinking of what I was reciting; I was not thinking of myself. And there was nothing in the little poem about myself."

"That was it. You had no idea what you were telling."

Her large eyes, full of light, were on his face. He was reminded of the first time they had been turned upon him, and asked: "You have no recollection of having seen me in Crookby's shop?"

"It is stupid of me; I am very absentminded sometimes, and I can't remember afterwards. But when I saw you in Portman Square, it seemed—it seemed as though I had known you before."

Once more he felt as though they were trembling upon actual avowals. But she rose, exclaiming: "I have not given you tea! You see, I am being absentminded again."

He told her he did not want any tea, but she said: "Oh, do let me give you tea! I told Sister Florida to prepare it for us, and she will be very disappointed if we do not have it."

She went out of the room for a moment, and then returned, smiling, soon followed by a pink-cheeked lay-sister carrying a tray.

"See what Sister Florida has brought us! Jam sandwiches and home-made cakes! Thank you, Sister. It was so kind of you."

"I was making up my mind to bring it even though you did not call, Mrs. Benwell," answered the little nun. "It was all ready, and I was afraid the tea would get cold."

"That was so kind of you," said Blanche. "Sister Florida is always so kind. Thank you so very much, Sister."

She continued thanking the little Sister in a dreamy absorption as she lifted the lid of the teapot and looked in, and the happy-faced nun gave Julian a quick half-

Digitized by Google

smile, as of a confidence about Blanche, before she went noiselessly out.

It seemed extraordinary to Julian to be in such a place; he felt that in a moment he would awake, and yet there was Mrs. Benwell busying herself with the plain white china on the cheaply lacquered tray.

"Sister Florida! That is a curious name," he said, taking his teacup from her.

"I think her name when she was in the world was Flora, and so Mother thought it a good plan. Florida, I think, was a martyr. I must ask Sister more about her Saint."

"Who is your Saint?" he asked, looking down at her as he stood.

"When I was baptized I took two other names, Mary and Helena. George has called the heroine of his play Helena. George," she said, glancing up, "is Mr. Carfrae. I am to act in his play. You know him, don't you?"

"A little," he answered, and, half suspicious, to see if her story would tally with Carfrae's, he asked: "Have you known him very long?"

"I knew him quite well long ago, before I was married," she answered—his first experience of hearing from her own lips that she had had a husband. "He lived near us at home—where I lived when I was a girl. And then I did not see him for years, till one day when I was reciting at a charity performance in Kensington. It was a charity for Catholic orphans. There was an improvised green-room behind the stage, and I was sitting there, waiting for my second recitation, when a page-boy told me a gentleman wanted to speak to me. I was very much surprised, and went out, and there I saw a tall man standing in the passage. He said: 'I am George Carfrae. Don't you recognize me?' And I said: 'George, it is as if you came to me out of a dream.'"

He had noticed her curious little exactitudes of speech, her habit of describing very literally what happened, rather as a child might do. She could talk very freely when she was *en tête-à-tête*, and it was only among many

Digitized by Google

people that she was silent. But at that moment he only remembered that she had called Carfrae "George."

"And then, how did you meet Cecil Armathwaite?" he asked, still greedy for more.

"George came to see me here, and told me he was writing a play. And then suddenly one day he said to me: 'If I write a play, and it is to be acted, will you act it for me?' I was more surprised than I can tell you. I said: 'But I have never acted, except in the provinces for six months—never in London.' But George said: 'Never mind. I will give you a part that will be easy for you to act.' I had to meet Mr. Armathwaite, because, of course, if he did not like me I couldn't act in this play, as in a way it is his. But he approved, and he comes and sees me now and we discuss it. We never talk of anything but the Comedy, I think! George will call it 'the Comedy'; I don't know why. He comes and tells me what the heroine is doing—her name, you remember, is Helena. He has not finished writing the play, for he keeps changing it. He writes very slowly. Sometimes he tells me I am Helena, and we pretend to act a scene together. It is an easy part for me, because——" She paused.

"Why is it easy for you?"

"It is rather difficult to explain, but in a way I understand Helena. George says to me, 'Helena, what are you going to do?' when we are pretending to act one of the scenes, and I have often told him I insult his clever ideas by giving him my stupid ones. But just because he has let me talk about her I feel as though I knew her now. It is almost as though I were beginning to be like her, I know her so well. . . . And what do you think he has done? I told him I should be terribly frightened for my first entrance—that I was sure I would forget my lines—and he said: 'But Helena is frightened, too, and she ought to seem shyer even than you feel!' That made me laugh, and I no longer dread my entrance, because I will not need to pretend to be self-confident. And then, for nearly the whole of the first scene I do not say a word."

Digitized by Google

He began to realize how she had taken hold of Carfrae's imagination; and Julian saw her, for a moment, entirely in the light of a mere inspiration. But that led him to speculate as to whether the play, as art, could stand without her to impersonate the central figure, and whether, should she cease to act in it, another woman—a real actress, not an unconscious one—could make it live.

They discussed the comedy a little longer, he perceiving more and more her air of other-worldness, her pause in the midst of her greatest flow of talk to look about her, vaguely, as if suddenly her mind were filled with other things. At moments her fixed eyes might have been taken for blind, so unseeing did they seem. And that gave him strange stirrings, of impatience, of tenderness, of irritated vanity.

He was startled by the continued ringing of a bell, and thought he must go.

"That was Angelus," she said; but as he had risen he could not very well sit down again, only he loitered before bidding his final good-bye.

"You will read the book, won't you?" he said, and touched "Marius the Epicurean," which lay on the table. He did not have much hope that she would understand it, but it had served as an excuse, and he added: "And may I come again to hear whether you like it?"

"Yes," she said. "It will be very nice. And then I can show you the chapel, if you would like to see it. I am sure you will think it beautiful."

"Mrs. Benwell, I must tell you—it is hard to say, but I have not got your faith. You will not like me less for that, will you? Yet I feel I must tell you, in case you take me under false pretences as your friend, that I am not a practising Catholic any more. I was merely brought up as one."

She did not answer, but her silence did not chill him, and when she gave him her hand he was suddenly touched—and quite simply, forgetting everything, even her beauty, in the recognition of her gentle spirit.

She followed him into the vestibule, and there the

Digitized by Google

magic departed; the porteress was opening the front-door, admitting a sudden vision of the street and a sharp increase of its noise, while the remarkably graceful and fashionable silhouette of a woman appeared on the door-step. This woman came gaily forward, the door closed upon that sudden swelling of sound, and there was a quick exchange of greetings.

"Dear Cintra! You have come."

In the reaction from his mood of softness Julian felt the blood rushing into his face, while the newcomer paused when she saw him; and the eyes of each, with an equal experience, swept over the other.

"I had no idea of meeting you here," she said.

"What! Do you know each other?" asked Blanche in surprise.

"I haven't met Miss Ellison for nearly a year," answered Julian suavely. "Where was the last time? At a dance, I think."

The new-comer smiled and turned back to Blanche, whose hand she held. "How are you?" she asked; but as Julian took his leave she met his eyes again, intently.

He went away with a curious impression of her own. They had a look, he thought, of never having known enough sleep.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IV

THE two women went back into the parlour, with the thought of the same man occupying both.

"I am so glad you have come, Cintra."

"I really oughtn't to stay more than a moment, but I came to see how you were, because you haven't been near me lately." Then: "I did not know you had met Mr. Eames."

"I have only known him a little while. He is a friend of Mr. Armathwaite's. But when did you know him?"

"It was long ago—five years. I was only twenty then."

She added: "I am sure I shall never feel as old again."

"Why, Cintra?"

"Don't you think one does? It seemed to me then that I knew everything that anybody had ever felt in the world. Nothing came as a surprise to me. I thought I had known it before. And now I cannot understand why people worry so much. What were you like at twenty? What were you doing then?"

"I married," answered Mrs. Benwell.

Cintra did not like to continue, and in a moment Blanche asked: "Is Mr. Eames much changed since you first knew him?"

"In looks, do you mean? Well, not much; four years older, that's all."

She had laughed, and then, because Blanche looked puzzled at that, she continued:

"He seemed to me to have been brought up in a forcing house, and to have known too much too young;

Digitized by Google

but, of course, I did not know him very well, and I have only seen him two or three times since, in London."

"Mr. Armathwaite said he has lived in London only the last two years."

"Really? He doesn't do anything, does he?"

"Mr. Armathwaite says he was private secretary for a short time to—but I've forgotten the name. It was somebody important, I think."

"He prefers indulging in little hobbies to doing anything seriously. He told me so once."

"You don't seem to like him, Cintra."

"I feel as if I knew nothing about him at all. I never did know him very well, and now it's a surprise that we can even recognize each other in the street."

Blanche seemed to be pondering this, but before she could come to any conclusion, Cintra had said: "Couldn't we go into chapel for a few minutes? I thought I heard Angelus as I came up the Square, and it made me want to go in. I can stay a little longer, I think."

"Of course we can go," said Blanche. "I meant to go myself, for, see! I brought down a veil on purpose."

She tied it loosely about her head, after which she led the way with a light heart. She had been conscious of the desire to be alone, and had felt her attention wandering even from Cintra.

The convent had been built fifty years before, when Kensington was a country suburb of London, for the use of a small enclosed order of fifteen nuns; but the order having expanded, and the idea of taking in boarders to help their finances having been introduced, the original convent was given up to guests, and a larger house added to it for the increased community. The garden had dwindled gradually, but was still over an acre in size, with a walk between lilac hedges leading to a Calvary.

Blanche took Cintra along a wide passage, which at that hour of the evening was so shadowy that neither was aware of a nun coming towards them till they were nearly abreast. She made them a shy inclination of the

Digitized by Google

head, barely looking at them, and passed on, her crossed hands hidden in her sleeves.

The chapel was empty, and closing the door softly behind them, for the silence was so great that any sound seemed unnatural and jarring, they took their places in the aisle, Blanche a few rows ahead of Cintra.

The nave was supported on slender grey stone columns, which were the gift of a rich parishioner, as was the organ and the stained-glass window. It was a small chapel, and, but for its columns and window, poorly appointed. The altar was disfigured by two plaster statues flanking it, and the Stations of the Cross were gaudy and vulgar. The nuns' stalls occupied a tribune to the right of the altar, upon which only one lamp was burning before the Tabernacle, for in their order Exposition and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament did not continue throughout the night.

Both women knelt, Blanche with awe and reverence, Cintra with her face raised in a kind of restless expectation. To her it was always as if the coloured statues within the altar-rail were breathing—the Virgin in her blue mantle, St. Joseph in his yellow coat. She looked to see them move, and always there seemed an atmosphere of waiting, of suspension, a pause before something that was about to begin. She felt the ebb and flow of sensations, and looking round her, curious but remote, she distinguished forms in the incense-scented dusk that led her farther and farther along a shadowy road. In her rapt introspection she seemed to see her life burning and paling like the single flame in the centre of the altar. She was then an object of wonder to herself.

For she had been in love with Julian, and to see him again meant, each time she saw him, a new readjustment of all her ideas about herself. She did not see him for four years after they parted, but in the last year she had now seen him three times. At first it had seemed impossible that she should have ceased to love him, and after their first meeting, a chance meeting in the street, she had wept all night. The second time she had felt a

Digitized by Google

profound disillusionment, because other men had come into her life, and other things had interested her, and because the intense significance of his presence had faded. He had not even spoken to her, and yet she could not believe that she was not significant to him still. Now the third time she saw him he was with Blanche. Perhaps he was in love with Blanche, and she was forced to readjust all her ideas about him. She had thought only of herself as changed, and remembered him always as he had been; there was amazement in the first moment of finding him living in a present that had entirely forgotten her. Her reason had told her that he also must have changed, and yet to see him with Blanche had seemed extraordinary and bitter.

There were no clear outlines in her incoherent thinking, and memories appeared but dimly, like figures looming through a mist; but in wondering why life happened as it did she tried to see what really had been wrong with Julian and herself. Why was it they had not kept each other? Yet nothing mattered now that he cared for another woman, and in anger it seemed as though she would find indifference. He had been untrue to the past; she forgot that she, too, had been untrue to it. It was almost as if Blanche had been untrue to her. And then, in spite of the triviality of her disappointment, memory stirred within her in an intolerable pang, though the tears that forced themselves to her eyes were tears of self-pity. It was all she knew of love, for she had loved no one else as she had loved him, and it was so little, so shadowy and indefinite! What was her life? What did other people get out of life? Living day by day was like following a narrow path set in a void, and she wondered if it were her fault that she could not see, if just a little way, on either hand. It was not so much that she wished to understand the beyond as that she found the present so blind and limited. It was her fault, perhaps, that material conditions seemed so important, but who would find it easy to live, without father and mother, with an old woman like her great-aunt? Her

Digitized by Google

aunt left her very independent; she knew a great many people, and it would be easy to think she led an interesting life for a girl; but before her there always rose up the picture of the dark little house where she lived with her aunt, the narrow staircase leading up into the cheerless rooms, while it seemed as if the cynical chill of that house laid its blighting influence on everything she did.

Her early girlhood had been different, and in the discontent of those days there had been something ardent and immortal. It was like a dream to remember that intense emotion that, without a cause, or anything she could name to herself, had sometimes taken her by the throat; she had struggled in the grip of her imagination as if it had been an enemy. It was about that time, being ready for it, that she fell in love, and that need for self-expression which is the first beginning of all the arts was narrowed down, for her, into the desire to be understood by one person, and that the man of her choice. When her love dream moved away like a mirage she was insensibly changed; she no longer wanted to explain herself. Her heart did not break, nor did she become permanently cynical, but the possibilities of life, which before had been elusive and infinite, were given a definite shape. Possibilities, therefore, became more or less rigid, and life was never again either as radiant or as incomprehensible as before.

Her thoughts grew thin and vague, and she looked over at Blanche and studied her attitude—looked at her face more sharply than usual, analyzing her, trying to see her as a man would do. . . .

Blanche had hardly stirred, but she had lifted her face from her hands and was contemplating the altar. She was thinking of the conversation she had had that afternoon, transposed into another key when she remembered it in this place of peace and holy incentive. God, to her, was as surely in the chapel as Cintra was. She talked to Him. She thanked Him for her conversion, and went back in mind over the days she had spent with the Little

Digitized by Google

Sisters of Mary in Rome. Soon she found herself thinking of what she would tell Julian if he asked her to finish the story of her conversion, and she tried to remember clearly how it had been.

She wondered how she could describe a certain perfect hour to Julian, in order to give him hope, and as she gazed at the altar, her clasped hands resting on the chair in front of her, she prayed again that she might find the right words. How could she describe the peace that had descended upon her, the joy of the knowledge that all her life would be spent in this haven upon which she had come with hardly an effort to deserve it, hardly a storm? Morning sunlight had streamed in, and she had noticed the dancing motes. She saw the altar through a golden haze, in which the image of the Holy Dove seemed to palpitate before her eyes. Every detail of the Roman Church was printed on her heart in that hour of ecstacy. Could she describe it to Julian? Could she describe just how it had been to her? The flying angels holding up the cornices, or carrying the arms of some bygone Pope between their hands, had given her a sense of jubilation in the heights, as if those dusty stucco figures beneath the decorated roof were a symbol of the rejoicing over her around the throne of Heaven. The altar pictures had looked at her with a heavenly sweetness, and she had sat in the shelter of a column, weeping with happiness; it brought back tears of gratitude whenever she thought of it still. There had seemed regret in his face when he said he was no longer a practising Catholic. If she prayed, might it not help him?

Cintra had risen from her knees, and was sitting back in her chair. The light behind the window had been blotted out; night must have come on, for her eyes, so jealously seeking Blanche, could hardly discern her. The minutes passed in a silence that seemed always about to quicken into life, and yet neither of the women moved. Their ungloved hands were mere patches of white, and their faces showed uncertainly, pallid and reflective in the gloom.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER V

JULIAN called twice again in so short a time that Blanche, after the greetings of the third visit were over, told him suddenly, as if the confidence were impelled out of her, that she was afraid Reverend Mother would not like it.

"But surely you are not at school here! There isn't any question of permission as to what you do and don't do!"

"No, but Mother takes an interest in me; she advises me as a friend. And then there are only two downstairs parlours, you know—it isn't a very big house—and the other day when George was here one of the other boarders wished to see her nephew, but she did not like to come in here, and the other parlour was full, so she went into the dining-room, and Mother does not like the dining-room to be used like that."

"You see Carfrae and Armathwaite, and so there is not time or room for me."

She did not take his words as he meant them, but answered simply:

"Oh, it isn't that exactly. It is true that Mother does not object to my seeing George, as I told her I had known him when I lived with my parents. And she does not mind others sometimes, but too many—yes, because of my position."

He felt an unpleasant shock, and met her eyes, which were fixed on him, and which, in their perfect directness, were impossible to read.

"What is it that you mean by your position?"

"Don't you know? Haven't they told you yet? I'm married still; I'm not a widow."

"But you don't—you can't consider yourself married

Digitized by Google

if you have no husband. You are free by law! You are free, and, being free, you have your duty to your own life."

"I am married—of course I am married! I am married for ever, not only now, but for afterwards. For I shall see him again after this life, and that means I must live in such a way now that when I see him I shall be able to be glad."

"You suffocate me," Julian exclaimed. "When you talk like that I feel as though I were strangling!"

She looked as if he had struck her, and only then did he realize how violently he had spoken.

"Forgive me if I am too vehement. I feel so vehemently, I can't hide it as I should. Because, according to me, you are wrong—because I am revolted by the things you have been made to believe!"

And in truth they had come as a shock to him, when he was expecting an afternoon of those serene suggestions that were to him like a book of lyric poetry, or a melody which he wished to have continually repeated. He had wanted merely to watch her, and become better acquainted with her rare spiritual enchantment, and he did not like these realities to rush in upon his fancies of her. Also, a husband quite so near was a reality he could not have disliked more heartily.

He suddenly turned his ill-humour upon the Church.

"All this is only what a priest has taught you. Confess! Isn't it a priest who is directing your life?"

"But of course! I can't understand you! The best that I know has been taught me by Father Dudley. If a man like him does not know, who else is there to teach me!"

"Don't you see that the Church teaches only what is useful to her?"

Then she, too, interrupted, but more in terror than anger.

"Hush! You don't know what you are saying! I must not listen to such a thing!"

"But if your marriage had been annulled," he said,

Digitized by Google

vehement once more, "you could have married again. What difference—ethically, I mean, with regard to your future life—is there between a divorce and an annulment?"

"The Church annuls a marriage if there is a good reason for it, if some impediment made it invalid. But where there is no reason for the unhappiness of a marriage, except the weakness and sinfulness of the husband and wife, then the Church makes us abide by our mistake. And is that not just?"

He wondered just how obstinate she could be, and upon what lack of temperament she based her piety; and then he remembered Carfrae's objection to the use of the word "temperament," and analyzed his own meaning of it. To him, in a woman it could only mean the quality of the love-element—a thought which led him on to the thought of her husband, and at that he felt an offended rage. For she ought never to have married, from the artistic point of view. . . .

"You did not really answer my question," he said. . . . "Was there *no* reason," he asked, speaking on a strong impulse, "why you could not have had your marriage annulled?"

She flushed, and he had a sudden impression of tears.

"Forgive me! Mrs. Benwell, it was unpardonable!"

"You will not talk of it again, will you?" she said. "I cannot understand why I myself have said so much. Before I knew it, in a moment, we were talking of these dreadful things."

"Forgive me!" he said again.

Then he made a great effort to think of some subject to begin on, and spoke of a book he had been reading.

He could see that she had been stirred, and the quickened rise and fall of her breath was a sign of some suppressed agitation. He, too, was not entirely calm, but the issues which had been raised in his mind were not definite, not sharply felt. He did not really know what to think.

But Blanche had been seized by a very actual emotion, and this was dismay that he should have spoken as he

Digitized by Google

had about the Church. She knew that he was not a practising Catholic, but she had not known, and could not have believed, that he was an apostate. His name suggested the terrible word, and had a very terrible significance for her. She did not know whether she ought not to speak again, and beg him to explain himself for fear she had misjudged him. For an instant she almost recoiled from him.

But his voice was having its effect on her, and when he paused, thinking she ought to be ready to answer, she felt there must be an explanation. She would not think so ill of him. It was an inflection of his voice that made her sure she had misjudged him.

He had asked her if she had gone on with "Marius the Epicurean," and was waiting for her reply, but she nearly asked him instead if it were not true that he had not meant what he said; and yet, though she could not ask him, she suddenly trusted.

"You will be disappointed in me," she answered. "I did not understand it very well. But there was one sentence I understood, and that I loved. I can say it to you, if you like."

"If only you would!"

"It is when, at the desire of his mother, he breaks up all the traps he had laid for the wild birds on the marshes. . . . 'A white bird,' she told him, looking at him gravely, 'a bird which he must carry in his bosom across a crowded public place—*his own soul was like that.*'"

It was a sudden, sharp happiness to hear her, and to know that, even though her perceptions were directed by her religiousness, she was yet not entirely without them. In an instant he was all warmth again, and while he talked she listened with her face upraised and her nether lip lightly caught between her teeth.

During the first visit he had paid her he had been astonished to see how perfectly they were able to transcend their surroundings, and now he saw in those same surroundings such a value of their own that they had become almost indispensable as a setting. If the large-

Digitized by Google

patterned wall-paper and holy pictures, the horsehair furniture and the cloth-bound books in regular piles on the centre table, had belonged to an ordinary lodging-house, he would hardly have wished to come again. The fact that they belonged to a convent, and the occasional entrance of a dim-faced nun, possessed a kind of fascination for him.

The conversation had become too impersonal, and he regretted it. It was his own fault. He broke off rather abruptly, and asked her about her little niece that he had heard she had adopted.

She moved in her chair, and evidently readjusted herself to the change of subject.

"My little niece," she said. "Yes, Mary. Indeed, I wish I had adopted her, but I have not been able to do that. I share her with another aunt of hers."

"Did you tell me her name?"

"Mary Craigie."

"Is she your brother's child?"

The name, he thought, would be some clue as to who Blanche Benwell was.

"No, my sister's. After I was received into the Church, as I told you, my family would not take me in, but my sister remained faithful to me. She used to come and see me while I was staying at the Convent of the Assumption in Sidcombe, and once she even came to stay with me there. And there she met the brother of a lady who was staying at the convent, and in a week they were engaged. It was very quick. She was received into the Church just before they were married, which was almost at once."

"That must have been a great joy to you."

"Ah, it was——"

"And then you had someone of your family to stay with, or at least to go to."

"Yes, but she died after two years—a year after Mary was born. It was very sad. Mary lived after that with her father, but two years ago he, too, died, very suddenly, without making any provision for Mary. We

Digitized by Google

found he had left no money at all. Those of my family who are still living would not take Mary, because she is, of course, a Catholic, so a married brother of her father's offered to take her during the summer months, when they move into a house with a garden, where it is nice for her to play. But in winter they have no room for her, so they and I combine to support her during the winter at a convent school at Ashington, just half an hour away from where they live. It is a very good convent, but it is very strict, and we cannot often go to see her. I wish I could see her oftener. Perhaps one of these days I shall be able to take her to live with me." She thought a moment. "That is why," she said at last, "I decided to go on the stage. It was to make money quickly for that. I think, perhaps, if George's play is a success, my dream will one of these days come true!"

"But I am glad I shall be able to see you before it does."

She looked frightened.

"Oh, don't say that!" she answered quickly.

He could see she was not by nature an actress; he had seen it all along. It had needed a strong inducement to send her on the stage, and then it must have been so easy, with that face, to get an engagement!

"You were received into the Church when you were eighteen, and your family refused to let you come home. Where did you go then?"

"The convent in Sidcombe first. For nine years," she said, "I have lived off and on in convents, with little more than a year's interval in between."

That, of course, was her marriage. He dared not ask another question, and in the silence that fell between them there seemed no necessity to speak. He studied her. It was life in the cloister, and yet not of it, that had made her what she was, and he could almost see the shadow of the veil about her narrowly framing the perfect oval of her face. His glance fell on her hands, and he could not help saying aloud:

"You have hands like a Madonna of Botticelli's!

Digitized by Google

They are hands that one ought to find in a convent; you have the fingers of a contemplative."

"Ah," she said, looking down at them, "but they are so idle. Dear Mother often scolds me for my idle hands, but though I try to please her, I so often fail."

And she spread her fingers, looking down at them and sighing.

When she lifted her eyes they met his. He was suddenly made afraid of going further along a path whose end he could not foresee, and, aware of the danger of the approaching shadow-hour, he rose. She rose with him as she thanked him for having come again.

"But I will not be allowed to come again for some time, even though Armathwaite and Carfrae can see you every day."

"Every day! You are joking. Mr. Armathwaite comes only sometimes. I have explained to Mother that he comes about the play, so does George, and so there is a reason for their coming. They are both connected with my profession, you see."

Julian laughed at her, and she laughed, too, without understanding, and then the porteress came in holding a lamp in her hand. Blanche turned to her with a smile, and Julian's last glimpse of her was thus, smiling silently at the little nun within the shifting yellow radius of the light.

But next day Cecil, too, awaked her conscience, when she found him calling twice in as short a time as Julian had. Yet it was impossible to speak to him as frankly as she had spoken to Julian, and while she listened to him she made up her mind that she must tell the porteress to say another time that she was not receiving. The porteress always let visitors in, running upstairs so excitedly and happily to tell her they had come. She would have to warn her. How strange it was that, having known Cecil longer than she had known Julian, she yet knew him so much less well! There seemed to be no confidence between her and Cecil. He made her shy. It was always difficult to talk to him, whereas she

Digitized by Google

talked to Julian more easily than she did to almost anyone else—perhaps more easily even than to Cintra, whom she had known for two years. Confidences had flowed from her so easily that in thinking over their conversations afterwards she was rather ashamed of herself; but then she remembered his kindness, his close, flattering attention and friendly questions, and she told herself she would be wrong not to trust him. It had been so hard to ask him not to come again for a time that, after she had done so, she was sad all the evening, and could not be sure it had really been her duty. But now that Cecil had come she saw her duty clearly, and was glad she had been strong; for it was clear she could not have these visitors more than once or twice a week. Mother was quite right.

Cecil, as his wont, was talking of himself. He told her where he had been, and the people he had met, and what he thought of them; and she listened constrainedly, not knowing how to answer. But he thought he saw admiration in her eyes, and talking to her was always delightful. The contrast between his life and the one she was leading was surely striking. He often saw the different aspects of their two lives as he talked, and his feeling for her was tangled between the sentiments of commiseration and tenderness. He did not formulate his exact attitude towards her, but if he had he might have expressed himself in the French of which he was so proud, and have recognized *qu'il aimait l'épater*. And he appreciated her beauty, not as Julian did, but as a sort of triumph of his own, for he was leading himself to believe that he had not only discovered, but created her.

He sat with his legs crossed, and in the midst of his monologue he looked down at his perfectly-creased trousers and removed a flake of mud. Then he resumed the balancing of his hat and stick across his knees, and his position, though not precisely graceful, was eloquent of *savoir faire*.

"It is extraordinary," he said, when the porteress

Digitized by Google

brought in the tea-tray and changed the current of his thought, "how dependent I am upon tea. But then I hardly ever eat lunch, you know—at least, so little it hardly counts. One must let, as Plato says, the body lie lightly about the soul"—for he had adopted Julian's habit of rich quotations.

"I cannot understand how people can be gross. Gross! The very word is distasteful, is it not?"

"Yes," she murmured, feeling that by this time he must expect her to say something. "I can't understand why some people like to eat so much."

"I like the bread-and-butter here better than anywhere else. I think it is because the butter is salty; and yet when Addison—you know Addison, my invaluable man—salted my butter, it was detestable. The only other place in the world where the bread-and-butter is as good as this is an orphan asylum somewhere—I forget if it is Islington, or Walham Green, or where, but I know I have since seen the name on omnibuses; an orphan asylum, as I was saying, which I was forced to endow. I really didn't want to, and yet all the papers came out with it as though I were the benefactor of the age. 'This generous and charitable-minded young man.' . . . It was absurd. I was only twenty-four, and it quite covered me with confusion."

He helped himself again.

"The dreadful little things had a treat or something in my honour, and I was made to go. They had tea at long tables, and they all stood up and sang their grace—sang, and their faces and hands were so chapped that they looked black. I had never seen such a thing before. And they had the kind of tea in big cups that slops. Have you ever noticed that weak tea slops much more easily than strong? It made me ill. But the bread-and-butter was delicious—delicious!"

"When I was a child," said Blanche, "I always wanted to get to the cake, and now I like the bread-and-butter best."

"How like life!" exclaimed Cecil, but got no further

Digitized by Google

not having crystallized his thought sufficiently before he embarked upon expression.

"Mrs. Hesketh was saying," he began again—"you know Mrs. Hesketh, don't you?" And not waiting for her answer, which would have been a negative, he threw himself into an anecdote, while she laid her elbow on the tea-tray and rested her chin in her hand.

She remembered how the day before Julian's figure had been outlined against the window behind him, and while he talked she had regretted that his chair must be uncomfortable, and had imagined how nice it would be if she had an easy-chair to offer him, and could see him sink back into it. . . . When he had spoken of her hands she noticed his own, which were finely shaped and white. But no, not really white—that would be womanish in a man. His hands were the shade of old ivory, and as strong and delicate as a piece of carving.

Her thoughts of him wove in and out. At the theatre the other night she had glanced at him when he was not looking at her, and she had seen his face in a sort of melancholy repose. It had made her wonder why he was sad. But she had never seen that sadness again, and when he was with her he was always animated. And yet not animated! She knew animation, and it wasn't that. It was more as if his soul were awake and speaking. . . .

She was roused by his name which Cecil had pronounced, and which seemed to stab her before she knew what was happening.

"Julian Eames must come too. What do you say? A dinner, I think, of twelve or fourteen—the room doesn't hold more than fourteen comfortably—because Gordon Conway has just come back from touring in America, and I am so anxious that he should meet you. The actor, you know. One really can't tell what mightn't come of a meeting. What do you say?"

She said it would be charming.

"How about Thursday week? Of course, you can come?"

She said she would be very pleased, and as the convent

Digitized by Google

closed at nine o'clock she would see who could put her up for the night.

"I will ask my friend Miss Ellison—Cintra Ellison. She often puts me up."

"Do you know Cintra Ellison? That good-looking girl whom Bertrand painted? I know her too, but I haven't seen her for a long time. . . . Cintra Ellison! Why, I must ask her to dinner, too. She will be quite an addition. She is thought very handsome, and will be quite a change. I must go and call on her. What is her address? I went once, but have forgotten it. She lives with an ancestor of her's, doesn't she?"

"Her great-aunt," said Blanche.

"But the ancestor type. I remember. . . ." And then he went over the names of the prospective guests with her, most of whom she did not know.

The night of Cecil's dinner-party she dressed with a kind of dreaming care.

Her room at the convent now that she was economizing for Mary's sake was narrow, a mere slip of a room. It was not exactly that that made up home for her. When she thought of returning home to her room it was one corner of it that rose up in her memory, and that often gave her a sensation of peace: the shrine she had made for herself in the angle by the window. A small table had been covered with a piece of heavy brocade, and on it were laid her rosary, her "Treasury of the Sacred Heart," and several little silver facsimiles of miraculous statues, Notre Dame de Lourdes, Notre Dame des Victoires, and others; two larger figures, St. Helena with her cross and St. Anthony of Padua, standing one on each side of a photograph of the "Madonna del Granduca," in a painted Florentine frame, formed her Holy of Holies. Before it there burned always a little light, a red glass jar of oil in which floated a wick.

On such a gala night as Cecil's dinner she had three candles on her dressing-table, and, mellowly illumined, she took a thin gold chain and medal from about her

Digitized by Google

neck, kissed it, and laid it away in a drawer; then she lifted from another drawer a shabby jewel-box and opened it. She brought out from it several pieces of old-fashioned jewellery that had been left her by her father's sister, of which two diamond brooches in heavy settings seemed made to be worn; but she had never taken the habit of jewellery, and they looked very bright on her black dress. She wavered, put them on and took them off, and could not make up her mind; but when she pinned the star against the hollow of her shoulder, the sparkle, which in reality was very subdued, pleased her childishness too much, and she left it there.

She blew out two of the candles, and turned away from the glass to look for her gloves, and as she did so her shadow moved over the wall, while the shadow, thrown obliquely, of the crucifix over her bed stood motionless and lamentable. . . . Having found her cloak and her gloves, she went over to her shrine and arranged the objects on it with her free hand, smiling to herself. All the time she was away the little red light would be burning, making the darkness warm. To her visionary mind it was a thought of infinite consolation, and the little light became the manifestation of a heavenly tenderness. Had she ever returned to find it extinguished, she would have been seized with superstitious dread. It would have meant that her saints, whose love for her was one of her only motives to live, had turned their faces away, and she would have felt as a husband might who discovers no fire burning on his hearth, and his wife fled. Her shrine was her hearth, a symbol of the only home that was left to her.

She blew out her candle and left the room, closing the door softly on the glow she was leaving behind; then she hurried downstairs, wondering if Cintra had not already come. She was always late herself, but Cintra was usually even later than she, and the porteress told her that no one as yet had called.

Supper for the convent boarders was over, and they were going up to their rooms, faded old ladies in caps and

Digitized by Google

rusty dresses, shrunken in body, as though accommodating themselves to the scant room an inhospitable world afforded them. One alone of them was large and massive, assertive in manner and apt to direct conversation at meals; she wore on her bosom a miniature of her dead husband, of whom she frequently spoke, with a sweeping pity and retrospective disdain.

"Ah! going out to dinner, Mrs. Benwell?" she said, meeting Blanche on the lowest stair.

"Yes, Mrs. Ashby," said Blanche, and nearly added: "I hope you don't mind."

"This is the second time within the fortnight, isn't it? Didn't you dine out ten nights ago? Last Tuesday week, I think it was."

"Did I, Mrs. Ashby?" said poor Blanche; but the other old ladies surrounded her with a fluttering like shy little birds.

"How pretty!" said one, and, "I hope you will enjoy yourself," murmured another; and a German girl, the only young woman beside Blanche who boarded, and an ardent creature with a fresh, commonplace face, seized her hand and furtively kissed it.

"Ah, Clara!" said Blanche, and turned on her a shining look; but the bell rang, and the porteress opened the door in a great flurry. Cintra was discovered standing outside.

"Come, Blanche, we are late!" she cried, and there was a gentle chorus of good-byes, after which the door, closing, shut off the little group in the draughty hall, which was gas-lit and paved with the tomb-like chilliness of black and white tiles.

In Cintra's shabby little brougham Blanche bent forward to see her friend.

"Are you very beautiful to-night, Cintra?"

"What nonsense! It is you. Do you know who is going to be there? Mr. Armathwaite didn't tell me. Did he tell you? Is Julian Eames coming?"

"Yes," said Blanche, hardly aware of the rising tide of excitement within herself, and taking the cause to be

Digitized by Google

the novelty of dining out. "And that friend of yours that you told me about on Saturday—Mr. Lovett. Mr. Armathwaite said yesterday that a man had fallen out, and he needed an extra one for the dinner, and everyone he could think of was engaged; and I hope you don't mind, Cintra, I suddenly remembered Mr. Lovett. It happened that Mr. Armathwaite had met him, and he said if you liked him he was sure to be all right. So I believe he is coming."

Cintra listened with interest and a certain amount of vexation. She had hoped for more dashing opportunities than talking to Charles Lovett that evening.

"But he is not an especial friend of mine. And I don't know how he will fit in with the other people at this dinner; he isn't a bit their kind. He has lived in America for years. You are so extraordinary, Blanche! One never knows if you are listening, or how much you are taking in, and then suddenly one finds that you have remembered something one didn't particularly mean you to remember, and have brought it, most unexpectedly, against one."

"But surely you don't mind!" said Blanche, distressed. "When Mr. Armathwaite asked me if I couldn't think of anybody, I don't know why, I mentioned Mr. Lovett, and said you knew him. That was all."

"It is all right," answered Cintra. "Dear Blanche, don't mind anything I say."

Her voice sounded as if it came from far away, and the two were silent. The intermittent lights of street-lamps, flashed in on them, showed them both preoccupied, until the hall of Cecil's flat brought their spirits to the crest of expectancy again.

Each genuinely admired the other when they came into a full illumination, and Blanche thought Cintra's dress the most beautiful she had ever seen. Indeed, with its threads of emerald green and gold woven into the brocade, it was strikingly picturesque. Sometimes Miss Ellison's picturesqueness was a little over-accentuated,

Digitized by Google

but on that night she was in sufficient looks to carry it off with a good deal of splendour and ease, and the effect she produced might, without too much stretch of fancy, have suggested a lady done by the Venetian school. She had sat for Bertrand's Dogaressa, and some people criticized her for still at times affecting the dress. But she suited it, for Cintra's face, in its oddness and clearness, was very much a Renaissance type, while her eyes were dark and almost opaque, like the eyes in an old portrait whose high lights have grown a little dim.

She and Blanche were the last to arrive, and as the door opened for them the twelve people gathered in Cecil's library blurred together before Blanche's vision into a crowd of faces that confused and frightened her. She stood still, her heart leaping, and then like a magnet her eyes were drawn, wavered a little, and met his right across the room, and she saw Julian standing before the fireplace. He was talking to someone. And before her mind could react from its sudden and paralyzing shyness her willing feet obeyed an impulse, and as if in a trance she moved instinctively towards him.

With his throb of emotion at seeing her at last, having stood for ten minutes where he could watch the door, it seemed natural that she should look for him, and, meeting his eyes, come towards him as if he alone were in the room. He nearly started forward to meet her—but then in a second the realization of other people, other faces that would stare and smile if once they noticed what he saw, surged over him.

It happened all in a moment. He had just time to perceive her dreamlike movement in his direction, to feel a fierce joy, and then a recoil of hot embarrassment for herself and him, and to see Cecil meet her and arrest her progress halfway across the room. No one had noticed, though everyone in the room was struck by the good looks of the last arrivals, and Blanche herself hardly knew from what error she had been saved. Cecil's voice, being familiar, cleared the mist for her, and then she saw Carfrae standing alone in a corner looking on.

Digitized by Google

That was enough; there were friends for her in the room, and she felt happiness rising to the same level as her anticipation.

Cintra and Charles Lovett went in to dinner ahead of Julian and Blanche, and after she had found her place Cintra remained standing, looking towards the door. When Julian and Blanche came in they were not talking to each other, yet something in the way she let her hand lie on his arm, and he held it there, made the action and their silence seem significant. They moved to the opposite side of the table, and Cintra was still watching them when she heard a voice at her elbow remarking:

"I don't think our host is in the habit of saying grace, Miss Ellison."

She turned with a start to find Mr. Lovett smiling at her, and it was a little difficult instantly to recover herself when she saw she was the last woman to sit down. As Lovett turned in his chair very frankly to look at her she turned towards him herself, determined to get at once into the swing of an animated conversation.

"Isn't it really clever of Mr. Armathwaite to have just the candles on the table, and no light in the rest of the room? It makes every woman know she is looking her best, and lends an atmosphere of dangerous mystery to the whole dinner-party."

"Do women know when they are looking their best? And why is it necessary to see you in the half-dark?" And then she remembered that in their short acquaintance he had treated her, from the first, with a sort of humorous comradeship.

She had known she must exert herself that evening, and had expected that kind of conversational fencing which made up so much of her intercourse with men. She had been prepared for it, having learnt to enjoy it, but when she knew—and she knew by instinct, without requiring to be told, and without, even, consciousness on his part that there was anything to understand—that she was to have something else instead, she was inexplicably softened by a rush of gratitude.

Digitized by Google

His friendliness, his humanity, fell upon her mood like dew. In return, something of herself was given out to him—perhaps only gratitude, and yet a passionate gratitude. In an instant, without his knowing it, she became intimate with him. She trusted him, she might almost have confided in him, even though he, aware of no psychic moment in which their comprehensions had fused, maintained no more than a naturally steady look upon her. Their feelings towards each other had been more like the reciprocal exchange of gifts.

"Of course we know when we look our best," she said, recovering the subject of her last remark; but she realized that she had not yet found the key to their usual nonsense, and rather than strike a false note she dropped into another tone. "That lady opposite," she added, "Mrs. Benwell, she could not look better, even she."

"She is beautiful," he answered, impartially yet critically. "Are we trying to prove anything?"

"You do think she is beautiful, don't you? Almost the most beautiful woman you have ever seen?"

"Yes, but she is too tragic. It saddens me to look at her."

"Tragic! But Blanche is no more tragic than a Greek head. I sometimes see no expression at all in her face, except a sort of meditation."

"Don't you? And I see something very tragic, except when she smiles. When she smiles there are limitations, and I think I would rather look at her than talk to her. I should be so afraid of making her laugh, and though I am sorry for her, I should hate to make her laugh."

"And what do you think of the man next to her?"

"To her right?"

"Yes. Well, no; I meant the other, Mr. Eames. You don't know him, do you?"

"Not actually. I have seen him once or twice, and the other night I heard him talk."

"And what did you think of him? For I see he made some impression."

"He made an impression that had, in a way, nothing

Digitized by Google

to do with himself. He reminded me—it wasn't his fault—of a very clever actor I once saw in a play in America. It must have been an English play. He took the part of a man who had been fired from all his clubs for some crookedness or other, but a type of Englishman who can lose his honour and know he is cut off, who can lose his shame, and yet keep something of his presence and all of his manners to the end."

"And in what could that remind you of Mr. Eames?" asked Cintra sharply.

"I told you it wasn't his fault, by which I meant that I didn't recognize the type in him, but only the actor. My actor looked like Mr.—you say his name is Eames?—and when he talked to the landlady in the play he had the same manner that Mr. Eames is using now."

She followed his glance, which had lost neither its lightness nor impartiality, and looked full at Julian, who was bending towards Blanche and talking to her in a low, urgent voice. His dark head and arresting face were thrown into admirable relief against the shadows of the room. He had dropped that melancholy air that gave him the appearance of a dreamer or a poet, and he radiated vitality and a delicate, discriminating ardour.

"I cannot help thinking," she heard Charles Lovett say, "that if Mr. Eames were in the position my actor hit off so cleverly, he would talk to his landlady in just that same way too."

"It seems very hard on him to say so," she returned. "You are accusing him, at the very least, of rather unmanly affectations."

"We have said nothing of affectations, surely. And, to be perfectly just, one might say that if his manner does not belong to the original man, it belongs to his second nature. He has probably become unaware of it, and we can envy him, because I am sure he is usually successful."

Before she noticed a pause he looked at her.

"I am an idiot probably," he said. "Is he a friend of yours?"

Digitized by Google

"I may say I hardly know him."

"I might so easily have fallen on a friend, and I have no business to criticize people. But I am not criticizing really, because I have only just speculated upon his looks. I like the looks of the other man whom she is turning to now, though I expect he'd be difficult to get at. The lady isn't as interested in talking to him, but I am sure he will be better for her than Mr. Eames."

It required eyes as sharp as Charles Lovett's to detect any difference between Blanche's manner of listening to Carfrae and the way in which she had looked at Julian. She smiled and said he must think her very frivolous.

"I am glad to see you here. You know, since I met you this last time, I have been sorry to see you go out so little to meet people."

"Perhaps you wonder that I have lived in a convent for so many years. Why is it that it surprises people that I should live in one?"

"I didn't know it surprised your friends," answered Carfrae. "I have always thought it the happiest place for you to live in."

She looked down. How strange that she should have quoted Julian all at once!

"Then why do you want me to see people? I think, perhaps, it would be even better for me if I never left the convent at all."

"I think there would come a time when you would inevitably want something else, and you would want that something else far more intensely if you had never had it at all."

"You forget that some people never need anything else, because they have a vocation."

It was usually easy for her to speak of vocation, but as soon as she had spoken of vocation to Carfrae she was conscious of something disturbing, an uneasiness like fear, that floated up to the surface of her mind. She looked around her at the brilliant table rising, as it were, out of the dimness of the room, and at the people who represented the world to her, and she thought it must be this

Digitized by Google

unusual scene that was disturbing and frightening her. It was like a scene on the stage. She wanted to touch Julian's arm, and tell him how unreal and far-away these people seemed. She was conscious of him at her side —he was her friend—but all the rest receded from her as she looked.

She was afraid, and everything she could think of frightened her. Something had stirred her instincts down at the very roots of life.

"George," she said, "I sometimes wonder how I am going to act in your play—I sometimes wonder how I am an actress at all. How was it I became one? The idea has begun to frighten me."

"What has put these thoughts into your head? You told me it was a girl at the convent who first suggested the idea to you. She had been on the stage."

"She died," said Blanche. "Yes, and she made a saint's death."

"Hasn't Father Dudley given his consent as long as you go to Mass every morning?"

"That is true. It is for Mary's sake, and so I must have courage. How well you understand! I always feel in your voice that you understand, and yet you are not a Catholic."

"I understand because we are both human beings," said Carfrae, smiling.

"It was suddenly as if I were afraid of a great many people, or just afraid of things that happened. And I wanted to be back at the convent, because there it is as if one were on the *other side* of things that happened, like a child at home."

"What has come over you, Helena?"

"It's because you don't know me that you think I am like Helena. I have always had a feeling that Helena was very strong. She was never afraid, and I have sometimes wanted to be like her, because she was so much better than I."

He looked at her closely.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VI

It was a custom at Cecil's dinner-parties for the men to follow the ladies at once into the drawing-room and smoke their cigarettes there, while only those who preferred cigars were banished to the library. Julian refused a cigar, but when he was about to return to the drawing-room he heard his name mentioned, which delayed him inevitably.

"Julian's rooms have the merit of at least one original trait," Cecil was saying, divided between the desire to show off his own rooms to their utmost and his disciple's loyalty to Julian. "He has not allowed the smallest reminder of the feminine to penetrate into them. His pictures, for instance, are all portraits, and all the portraits of men, and even his paper-weight is a silver Mercury."

"I kept out the feminine as long as I could," answered Julian, "but I was completely successful only in my smoking-room."

"Ah, yes! I forgot. She entered once, but in the guise of religion. Insidious Madonna!"

"I suppose you mean my Botticelli?" said Julian, pronouncing the name, which had been discovered some years before by Ruskin and Pater, but which was still a craze, with an Italian cadence. "I once made a pilgrimage to Florence, leaving London at an hour's notice, solely to see the Madonna of the Pomegranates. I have put my copy of her in my bedroom."

"The feminine in the guise of religion went far," murmured a voice.

"And his relics! Your relics, Julian, I am sure, are unique. He has wooden figures of saints, you know—

Digitized by Google

two of them are life-size, carved and painted, the kind that stand in shrines and are carried in processions. One feels oneself in a frightened atheist's nightmare when one enters his hall."

"My man on one occasion used Our Lord's head as a hat-rack, but he was severely reprimanded," said Julian.

There was a laugh, during which he happened to look at Carfrae. The expression on Julian's face was striving after the humour of seeming perfectly reverent, and Carfrae answered with a mouth that smiled and eyes that remained faintly contemptuous.

Then Julian departed, but in the drawing-room too he was detained. A little group was near the door and someone spoke to him. He was obliged to linger.

"Two such handsome women," said a lady in black; "that one over there, for instance."

She nodded at Cintra, who was sitting in the corner of a sofa, and with one hand resting on her hip was listening to Charles Lovett as he stood beside her.

"She is very handsome," answered Julian smoothly. "That sweep of ruddy hair—really most effective. But, it is a moody and uncertain kind of handsomeness."

"A face of possibilities," she rejoined.

"When I first met her, she was different altogether—in fact she was delightfully ingenuous. She has shown imagination."

"What did you do to her, I wonder?" asked his companion.

"I? You flatter me. Nothing. Then I admired from a distance, and now I am applauding across the room."

"It is a small room," she said, "so perhaps you are coming nearer."

He laughed, shaking his head, and looked over at Blanche.

"And what is this Mr. Carfrae who is writing a play?" continued the lady, at which the spasmodic buzzing of talk subsided, and there was a perceptible pause. Blanche looked startled.

"Mr. Carfrae is very actual," said Julian. "His

Digitized by Google

writing is only a rumour. I hope, if it materializes, that it will supply a need which all theatre-goers are beginning to feel. The play nowadays has not yet come close to the earth of realism, nor is it high up in the clouds of imagination, but it occupies a sort of first-floor-front of gentility or smartness."

"That which many people consider realism," said Charles Lovett unexpectedly, "is very often connected, not with good earth, but with the pavements."

"And some streets are very much worse than others," added the lady in black.

Julian had turned to Lovett with an answer, but he was suddenly confronted by Cintra's steady smile upon him. Her eyebrows, thinly arched over her broad white eyelids, gave a perpetual expression of being slightly raised in inquiry, and he was suddenly fascinated by the mysterious irregularities of her face. He was even fascinated by the gleam of a cosmetic which he saw on her lips, and an air of sophistication that hardened and changed her. He forgot to answer Lovett at all; there was a moment's silence, and he seemed to be losing his self-possession when the door opened and the smokers emerged out of the library.

Julian rose, and for a second Cintra thought he was about to speak to her. The next moment it seemed as though he obviously avoided her, and he passed her sofa on his way to Blanche. And yet in reality he was still aware of her, and she was reflected upon his inner consciousness like a troubled image upon the deep black water of a well.

Blanche, too, had risen, and when he reached her side she was alone.

"You are not going?" he said. "Surely not yet!"

"No, no! And yet you are sure it is all right to stay? Everyone is standing up. Does it not mean they are going?"

"They will stay for another hour if Cecil is to consider his party a success. But this room is much too small for everybody, and I am sure he means some of us to go into

Digitized by Google

the library. Shall you and I go? I know it will be doing him a favour."

"Really?" she said, and was nevertheless doubtful.

But, determined not to lose his opportunity, he led the way. She followed, and when they reached the solitude of the next room he felt confident that their exit had been almost unnoticed. If only they could remain undisturbed! For the empty room was delightful to him. His nerves had been throbbing—and yet to see her sink into a chair did nothing to quiet them. She did not lean back, but, resting her arms along her knees, she clasped her hands together and gazed straight ahead of her.

Instead of sitting down he walked about the room, glancing at the pictures on the walls and the fine display of books. He had felt a wish to look at her closely and talk to her, but with the opportunity of satisfying his desire a growing excitement made that, at least for a few minutes, impossible.

All the events of the evening had tended to excite him.

When he had sat with her in the convent parlour he had been simple in his enchantment, had talked without thinking of effect, and received impressions without inspecting them too carefully. But seeing her in his own surroundings, as it were, had awaked his egoism. At dinner he had never entirely forgotten that other people were present, and he remembered them in his pleasure that so beautiful a woman should show herself so clearly under his influence. That in turn had kindled his vanity, and his vanity was urging him on. Then that sudden shock of Cintra's personality—a shock whose effects, in a way, he was still feeling—had roused a restlessness within him that was increasing, and that he waited for Blanche to appease. He moved impulsively back to her chair, but before he reached her he stopped. Her attitude, shrunk a little into herself, and the diaphanous tulle wings upon her shoulders, smote him.

"Ah, Psyche!" he said.

"What are you? Do you understand yourself? If

Digitized by Google

you could tell me I would know better, perhaps, what it is you are doing to me."

Her eyelids lifted; she was like a woman who is confronted with a vision.

"When I first met you I think I passed my hand over my eyes, because I did not believe that anything so beautiful could really exist. And now you seem to represent all the hopes and illusions I have ever had, to bear a fleeting resemblance to everything beautiful I have ever known—and from one moment to another to be not quite the same, and yet never entirely different."

He was gazing at her so intently that for a moment he could hardly see her at all. His eyes—his mind even—became blurred in a culmination of his emotion which was reached upon the sound of his own words, when he seemed to find in her the ideal embodiment of all his ideals, and all his dreamings were gathered into one perfect form. For that moment he was adrift upon a sea of poetry, loveliness, and exquisite conjecture. Words he had often imagined saying came back to his mind and floated there like clouds at dawn, mirrored in new and fairer colours upon his clearer fancy; and he hardly knew when he began to say them aloud, but he found himself speaking as he watched her, and the question in her eyes.

"Does one not often dream of someone one may some day find—dreams in which one has glimpses of things like and unlike all those beautiful things that one has both known, and never known and only heard of? That is what I meant when I said that you seemed to change before my very eyes. You have the changing face of those most secret dreams."

But he was suddenly caught up by a realization of what he was saying. He had spoken, indirectly, of things that might lose him the little he had of her, and then he had implied love when he did not mean love. It was not love, not yet. Their last conversation rose up in his memory like a menace, and at the same time he was aware of the subtler meanings with regard to her that his words conveyed to his mind.

Digitized by Google

For, sitting there so still she was like a statue, her aspect was almost symbolic, showing him by a miracle the face of poetry, the poetry for which he had always sought. She had the aspect of all beautiful dreams, but she was not yet, as a woman, the fulfilment of what he had dreamed of. Even if she loved him, could she understand him ? And it was understanding that he wanted, in his delicate intellectual refinements, his emotional intellectuality, his artistic emotions. She was religious, she considered herself married; and to him religious scruples in love would have seemed sacrilege in the more sacred religion of the heart, of which he was a worshipper.

She lifted her eyes again to his.

" What are you saying to me ?" she asked.

All answer was struck from him. He hardly knew what he had said. Those sensations had come and gone so quickly, so suddenly. As soon as she had spoken he was filled, and made almost ashamed, by the idea of her simplicity.

He stammered, " What I have said——" and again he was bending towards her when the door opened, and Cecil appeared.

The fear of an interruption had been almost enough to spoil Julian's pleasure in their *tête-à-tête* when he and Blanche had first found themselves in the library, but he had come so completely to forget its possibility that Cecil's entrance was a kind of shock. And Cecil's face had strengthened into real expression—a displeasure as unexpectedly forcible as sternness.

" Does not Mrs. Benwell wish to meet some of the other people here to-night ?" he asked. " I was anxious to introduce Mr. Conway to her, and we have missed you for some time."

Julian at the first moment had had the sense of being caught in some equivocal situation. But when Cecil fluttered his eyelids—a trick he detested—he recognized the mere absurdity of this claim upon Blanche.

" I had no idea I was keeping Mrs. Benwell from so delightful an introduction, and I am sorry," he added,

Digitized by Google

turning to her, "that I should have been so inconsiderate."

She glanced from one to the other.

"Perhaps," she said, "I had better go home now;" and loftily—ridiculous loftiness, thought Julian, with rage—Cecil replied:

"Let me introduce Gordon Conway before you go . . ."

Julian was obliged to follow, and in the drawing-room he stood apart, with his hands on his sides, watching the little groups before him.

Cecil was at last effecting an introduction between Gordon Conway and Blanche, and it was with an obscure pang that Julian saw her standing with the actor and looking up at him. Conway was a fairly clever actor, but it was upon his appearance that a large part of his success depended. He was clean-shaven and very dark, darker even than Julian, and the expression of his deep-set eyes was idealistic and grave. As he and Blanche stood together there was a common quality between them that made itself felt, and that drew the attention of several people in the room. They were both, in appearance at least, so finely chiselled and serene.

Then Julian was reminded of the play, which he had been inclined to forget just lately, and he saw Carfrae watching the two talking in the corner. And, impressed by his face, with a grudging respect Julian thought: "That man may achieve something." What if his play were really worth something! And supposing Conway could be got to act in it. . . . He himself would be glad. Blanche on the stage; Blanche mingling with the men—the women, too—that life on the stage produces. . . . It set him on edge. But Conway would be better—in fact, the best man who, from Julian's point of view, could be found. For he was a gentleman by birth, and then, apart from his acting and appearance, was a somewhat negligible quantity. And he was said to be interested—no one knew quite how, or to what extent—in this little Mrs. Morgan, this animated little creature in white. He knew that Conway had acted her husband's plays up till

Digitized by Google

then, and it would be interesting to see if he could be induced to act Carfrae's. . . .

The party was breaking up. Blanche was going, and he could not have another word with her. He felt an extraordinary unrest, and wondered where he could go when he left Cecil's.

He touched Blanche's hand, and a moment after he touched Cintra's, and watched her leave the room. He noticed Cintra's carriage, which was distinctive, her narrow hips, and the slight movement of her shoulders when she walked. She paused on the threshold to speak to Mrs. Morgan. Her head was bent to the smaller woman, and her face was turned in profile to Julian. But he knew she was self-conscious, and moved away. He thought he was sick with the dissatisfaction of life at that moment.

A little later he was walking up the street alone, thinking over the events of the evening and of all that they led him to remember.

The first time he had seen Cintra again, after not seeing or hearing of her for four years, he had been surprised at ever having been in love with her, and he had dismissed her from his consideration. The second time he saw her she awoke in his mind a kind of murmur of pain, but it was not so much herself that disturbed him as the memory of what he had gone through while he knew her. When he first met her he was living through the most terrible period of his life. He still hated to think of it, and one of the reasons that he kept away from her, knowing her to be in London, was because he wished to forget all that she was connected with in the past. But after he met her at the door of Blanche's convent he thought that he might like to see her again—at least one last time in which to tell each other what had happened to them after they parted. He would have liked that day to know how she lived, and what sort of a woman she had become; but when he found her in Cecil's library he was too occupied with Blanche to feel that curiosity any longer. He quite forgot Cintra was in the room till he met her eyes across it.

Digitized by Google

He told the woman in black that Cintra had been delightfully ingenuous when first he knew her, by which he slightly ridiculed his own memory of her principal charm—that of a sort of restrained exuberance of vitality and naturalness. This was not translated into many words or into any particular energy of action, but was something one felt as a force in her, as a potentiality, of which one was conscious as she approached, as she looked at one, as one walked beside her. It had been that which had held him, although he also dreaded it, and he remembered walking with her up a certain road, up and down a certain avenue of trees, with this ardour for him at his side amazing and influencing him.

Unwillingly he remembered how it had been the first time he ever saw her—the evening sunlight on the wide lake winding like a river, and the pink arcades of the Italian village mirrored far out. The jewelled water lapped under the keel of her boat, and in the gentle stillness of the hour she came up a flight of landing-steps towards him.

Grosvenor Road was empty, and on that dry night the deserted pavement shone like a sweep of glass under the lamps. He leaned his elbows on the Embankment wall, and as his sight plunged into the darkness of dim shapes he saw old-fashioned figure-heads and prows rising above the walls of a store-yard against a yellow space in the sky. Black clouds hung low over the buildings of the opposite shore, where the flames of an iron-foundry gave them a fitful edge of fire; and a few barges, showing now a red light and now a green, slipped below him with the noiseless slipping of the current. The silence was intense for a few instants, and the sense of life was pushed back to the very edge of consciousness, while a dreary emptiness created itself in the disquieted, unoccupied mind.

To remember at all was like hearing the flat and inharmonious echoes of a music one had thought magnificent. What a rage of living had been his, and what regrets; and yet, perhaps, there had been more cause for regret

Digitized by Google

than regret itself! He had begun with a mistake, for with the idea that the greatest loves are often the disastrous ones, he had loved disastrously and never greatly, and a further mistake lay—but this he did not see—in striving to crystallize poetry and romance into experience, as if poetry and romance could come to be numbered among a man's goods, and be greedily clutched at and consciously possessed.

. . . Why had Cintra looked at him as she did, and, out of the stranger she had become, turned into something intimate and compelling? It was as if, in the face of a strange woman, eyes that had seen his life looked out at him. If he had peered into them he might almost have seen his past there, written, like a written page, and she all the while as if unknown to him. . . . Phrases of his love-making haunted him, and then, after a time, the memory of the moments, scattered through those years, when he had asked himself: "Why am I here? Is this my own choice? But mightn't there, somewhere, be *something else?* . . ." And as if connected with those aspirations the quality of Blanche came gradually to be remembered by him—her innocence, her very lack of quickness, the divine dulness of her faith in a universal good. He became absorbed in the idea of her influence, losing sight of her claims as an individual; for she had never completely imposed herself upon him, neither as an individual nor as a woman, but had always stood beyond the reach of both equality and passion. Passionate love would have been needed for him to recognize her fully. His spirit was not big enough to love with; it could only grope. But it was groping towards her when he murmured to himself:

"*Ah! si du moins, loin des baisers et des combats,*
Quelque chose demeure un peu sur la montagne! . . ."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VII

THE German girl who boarded at the Convent had come in to help her mend her linen, and the two were sitting by the window, sewing, when there came a knock at the door; and hard on the knock the porteress, speaking through the keyhole, announced that Mrs. Benwell had a visitor downstairs. Blanche got up so quickly when she heard it that the wooden darning-egg fell to the floor and rolled over the boards.

"Come in, Sister, do come in. Who did you say it was?"

The porteress opened the door a few inches and looked in.

"The very tall gentleman, Mrs. Benwell. The tall gentleman with grey hair. I thought you would be pleased."

"It is Mr. Carfrae; tell him I will be down in a minute."

The door closed again, and Blanche folded up the work she had been doing.

"But I am very untidy," she said, and going over to the dressing-table she looked into the mirror and vaguely touched her hair.

It was because of a sudden blankness, in which she did not know what she was doing, that she stood looking at herself. Then the reflection of the other woman's face appeared beside her own and she gave a start, but coming to herself again she smiled at their reflections, while the German girl straightened her sleeves for her and adjusted the folds of her skirt.

"I will be back soon, Clara," she said, going to the door, and Clara answered:

"It would be better not too soon! For the beautiful

Digitized by Google

fingers cannot sew as well as mine, and I would rather finish alone!"

She kissed her hand and Blanche, still smiling absently, disappeared.

On the way downstairs she wondered why she was not gladder to see Carfrae, and her compunction made her welcome a little more effusive than usual.

"Ah, George!" she said, as she saw him standing in the middle of the parlour. "It is nice of you to pay me a visit."

"Do you know why I've come? It is because this is the first sunny day we've had for a week, and I was sure you wouldn't, if left to yourself, make use of it by taking a walk."

"I think I was going to, wasn't I? I always feel you know best, and yet, all the same, I do think I was going out!"

"Then why isn't your hat on? Go and put on your things, and I will take you to Kensington Gardens."

When she had put on her things, and they were walking down the Square, he looked at her again and said she seemed tired.

"We will take a hansom, for you can't walk all that way. And I want you to walk under the trees and smell the earth in the sunshine."

She begged him not to be extravagant, but he had already hailed a hansom, and when they were in it she confessed that she loved driving in hansoms.

"Seeing all the people!" she said, and she rested her hands on the wooden apron of the cab and looked before her almost eagerly.

"And hearing the bells on the horse!" she added, looking round at him and smiling.

The cab left them at the end of the High Street, and they walked slowly up a broad avenue of trees towards the Round Pond. It was, indeed, an afternoon of sunlight that was almost warm, and she glanced up to see if there was any budding in the high, over-arching elms. The Palace came to view through a distant vista, and

Digitized by Google

when they chose a bench, it was one which showed them a sweep of water set deep in a green lawn. She was glad to sit down, and her attention was instantly claimed by the children who had come out with their nursemaids, and who were playing all manner of games; their voices made a gay hubbub that sometimes lessened with distance, and then swelled again as the little people raced over the grass before them. If only Mary were one of them ! . . .

He was wondering how he could begin about Gordon Conway.

"The porteress said the tall gentleman with the grey hair had come to see me, but your hair isn't grey, is it, George ?"

"I think it may be getting that way by this time," he answered. "A little premature, perhaps !"

"And you don't feel old, do you, George ?"

"Perhaps not. But then I don't think I ever felt very young. I have always been an unfortunately solemn fellow."

"You were not solemn when I met you first. Yet I think you were always rather silent "—and her eyes rested upon him gently.

But he did not take the opening that was offered him, for he remembered that she usually slipped away from recollections of their past acquaintance. He pointed to the sky, pale and transparent, and the edge of the trees against the horizon, and said: "How those clouds lean towards the earth — as coy and as dainty-looking as porcelain . . . " They had never referred to her husband or to her marriage, even though, in the last three months, he had constantly seen her, and he wondered if the time would ever come when she would confide in him. He often felt curiosity as to what her experience had been, whether it had been tragic or merely negative, the absence of happiness, and also what sort of a man her husband had been. He knew no one who had ever met her husband. He tried to discern what changes had been wrought within by her marriage and divorce, and what effect they had had upon her character, but all the difference that he could

Digitized by Google

see between the woman she was and the girl she had been lay in her religiousness.

She had been very young, not yet converted when he knew her first, and to the characteristics of a personality that seemed quite unchanged to him she had merely added this unquestioning faith that all-sufficed her. She did not, even, seem older, except in the greater poise and equanimity which her religion gave her. She had always been unspoiled, unobservant, and sweetly absentminded. Her contemporaries had laughed at her, and yet treated her with extraordinary consideration and respect; he remembered how one or two of her girl friends had adored her from a distance, but how the boys seemed afraid of her, and how, in spite of her beauty, she never appeared to have as much attention as the other girls. She had ensnared his own fancy at once, and yet he had never been in love with her; when he was with her his mind was too busy with trying to describe her and the impression she made upon one.

He had been a little too fanciful about her then, whereas now he saw her human; he saw her very human, not in the sense of frailty and weakness, but in her dear, her touching limitations, of mind, of intelligence, of horizon. He knew that her soul had no great range of vision, for it had been given an outlook that commanded only a piece of the sky, upon which it gazed, unaware that any other worlds existed.

"How far have you got with the play?" she said. "Have you written much of it since the last time you came to see me?"

"I have it all now but the third act. But I am discouraged. It isn't going so well; it's as though the words were traitors, never expressing what they were meant to express."

"I thought it was beautiful," she murmured.

"Blanche, what did you think of Gordon Conway? Do not repeat this, for it is only a hope——"

"That Conway will take the play?"

"Would he not be the right brother for you, Helena?"

Digitized by Google

She gave him a little smile. "It is for Helena to be satisfied," she answered.

"Imagine coming out at the Westminster Theatre! Wouldn't it be too good to be true if the play took Conway's fancy? It would seem too good to be true for about three minutes, and then I would feel convinced that Conway could never give the least idea of *Greville*, and the fact that the play was going to be produced would no longer give me the least satisfaction. And that is what is always going to happen if the play gets taken. No actor or actress I know of is good enough for my characters—except you, Blanche. . . . To see the play acted will probably be agony. Yet when I think that it will never be acted, that is agony too."

"But why do you think it will never be acted?" she said, instinctively sympathetic, and only dimly comprehending his discouragement. She had so much faith that the play would be accepted that she could not understand why he should ever doubt it.

"If I don't think any actor-manager good enough for the part, no actor-manager will think the part good enough for him. It isn't a very heroic part; no part is very heroic; and all the dramatic action takes place behind the scenes, and the audience gets only the reflex of it. . . . I wonder if I will get anyone to agree with me there."

"Mr. Armathwaite——" she began.

"Armathwaite!" he exclaimed. "I am hoping more and more that we won't have to depend on him!"

To talk to her about the practical side of the question was like thinking aloud, for it did not seem to matter if she understood or not, even if she listened or not. Her little stereotyped phrases of hopefulness caused him only a half-tender feeling of amusement.

"You must try all the West End theatres first," she said. "It seems impossible it shouldn't be taken."

"Most of the West End theatres are run just now by actor-managers who are married—all except Conway—and therefore their wives would have to cast the part of

Digitized by Google

leading lady. Well, even if it doesn't get taken, it was good practice, if only in stage-craft. For instance, my characters have learnt to come in and go out quite reasonably by one door at perfectly conventional hours, and there's a lot in that, you know! In this last play at the Lyceum, three doors in each set hardly sufficed, even helped by a French window or two to let the villain in at midnight. And in most of the plays I've seen this year, or last either, only the most unstinted use of modern mechanical inventions could bring the climax about. If anyone takes my play they will find at least one advantage in it: that it can be mounted at a minimum of expense."

She was smiling over what he had said, and as they looked at each other they realized how natural it seemed to be together.

"Did I tell you I had given up that idea for a third act that we discussed the other day? It wasn't really good, was it? Helena wouldn't have said that."

"But why do you ask me, George? I wouldn't know." But timidly, as though she were afraid of annoying him:

"Still . . . I thought it over myself, and, do you know, I would be rather disappointed in Helena if she *had* said that. It seems to me she should have been sorrier for the man. Wouldn't you have been sorrier for the man? I should have." She glanced at him and saw his face in profile.

"But Helena is so much cleverer than I."

"No," he answered. "I don't think Helena would have said it. There was just not that in Helena's character. . . . We must have Anna come out with something more definite, Blanche. And now that we realize that attitude of Helena's is impossible——" He broke off, and when he spoke again he seemed to be following another train of thought.

"But we like that austerity of tone throughout, don't we, Helena, through which you move in your way and Anna in hers. Yes, we must never depart from those

Digitized by Google

half-tones, but in the third act there must be something a little stronger than that."

He had discovered, as it was inevitable he should discover, when he built his play upon a single character and not upon a situation, that his composition lacked the moment when it found it's reason of being and fulfilled itself; and he felt that in the third act all the characters should have been drawn into a single action, the positive characters and Helena together. In cold and self-restrained surroundings emotion was born quite stark and unadorned, and Helena's personality made a contrast to the coldness and reasonableness, as well as to the violence of that explosion of nature, while she herself remained totally unconscious of either.

He was thinking that the weakness of his composition was revealed by the fact that a moment of fulfilment did not create itself from sheer necessity, when she gave a start as she sat beside him, and asked him what time it was. He looked at his watch, and told her it was a quarter to four. They had been out three-quarters of an hour.

"Have you anything to do this afternoon?" he asked.

"No," she said; but, glancing at the sky, she added: "The sun is beginning to go in."

The children had not yet gone home. The sunlight had shifted, and was lighting with a brittle radiance a copse of leafless trees that only half concealed a pathway. A young girl was walking up and down it, reading.

Blanche watched her passing and repassing behind the trunks of the trees, and the sunlight, pale like the reflection of light from glass, chequered her dark dress. She never once looked up.

Blanche wondered for whom she was waiting, and if she were waiting for anyone, and she found herself wondering how it would be to wait for someone who was sure to come. When she had asked George what time it was, she had suddenly thought that Julian might come that afternoon to see her. But it was still too early; he had never come before five.

Digitized by Google

He had come only three times in all to see her, and she had seen him only three other times to speak to. If one counted the meeting of eyes in the shop, she had seen him only seven times in her life.

During the ten days that had elapsed between his last visit and Cecil's dinner she had often thought of him, but each time it was with relief that she had done her duty; it was clearly not right that he should come so often to the convent. But since the night of the dinner she had thought only of his next visit, and she could not prevent herself from imagining how it would be. It was impossible that he should not come again. . . . She had waked up early that morning, seeing the dawn livid-white against her thin, grey curtain, and remembering all he had said to her that other night. In that still, ghostly hour, with her room full of unknown shapes, all the words he had said to her returned with a bell-like precision. She did not know what he had meant by them. She was suddenly shaken, and she had sat up in bed, nursing her knees, her eyes fixing themselves upon a corner of the room. But the sight of her altar, appearing out of the shadows, reassured her, and she fell back upon her pillow. She went to sleep as the sparrows chattered on her window-sill.

Now she felt tired, both mind and heart were tired, and her thoughts seemed to hobble like little old men.

"George," she said suddenly, "do you remember what I told you the other night, that I was afraid of going on the stage? I can't feel I will do well. A London house! And I in the principal part! How will I have the courage?"

"If it ever gets taken and you act it, we will have so many rehearsals that you will be able to act it in a dream. It will hardly require any effort."

"Why don't you find someone cleverer, who could act Helena better than I can?"

"Because I could not give Helena into any other hands. I feel you and I are the only people who know her. No one else could know her as well."

Digitized by Google

For a moment her head inclined towards her hands, and she covered her eyes.

Dreams! Why had he spoken of nothing but dreams? Why was she a dream to him? Was it for the same reason that she, when she first saw him, thought, as he was so familiar to her, she must have dreamt of him before? Why did he say to her, "You have the face of my dreams?" What did it mean?

Her hands dropped again, and Carfrae wondered of what she was thinking.

"I thought I had given up the stage," she said. "Although, when our company broke up, I felt it was my duty to look for another 'shop,' as they say; but I could get nothing. I hardly ever got a hearing. I used to wait for hours outside a manager's office, or a dramatic agency, and all the time I felt if ever I was given a part I should be sorry. It was cowardly of me. . . . But when I came home from touring, it was so beautiful to be back in the convent."

"Was it then you went as a companion to an old lady?"

"Yes, for three months. It is she, as I told you, who got me that engagement at the Charity Concert where I met you. They did not pay me for that, but I got another engagement through it. And that led to another —to Mrs. James's—and then Mrs. Barton's daughter came home from India, and she did not need me any more. But, after all, it was no use my going as a companion. They paid me so little. What I needed was to make as much money as I could, so that I could afford to take Mary to live with me.

"Oh, George, even so I wonder how it was I ever went on the stage. It was that girl at the convent who used to tell me about it. She asked me to go and see her manager, who had been so kind to her, and one day, to please her, I went. He engaged me that very day. But I've told you all this before. . . . I was so surprised myself. I hardly knew what it meant. But when I told Mother my hopes about Mary, she advised me to accept his offer, and she said—dear, dear Mother!—'Accept it,

Digitized by Google

my dear child, for I believe, with God's grace, you can live unspotted in the world.' "

She mused.

" At night sometimes I wonder how I have the courage to face so many people and recite. But when the hour comes, I am not so very afraid. I say to myself I must do my best; that perhaps it will be vouchsafed to me to give people pleasure; and then, after all, I am always in God's hands."

She turned towards him. In one of her nervous moments she had pushed up her veil, which made a hard, dark line above her eyebrows, and, narrowly framing her temples, gave her a strained and enigmatic expression that she had never worn before. But he did not speak of it, and soon she drew down her veil, and in its shadow she became once more familiar. The sun had gone in. They both rose and began to walk quickly, for sitting so long had chilled them a little.

Their way lay along the backs of the gardens behind Scarsdale Terrace—the gardens that had pleased Julian the first day he went to see her. Carfrae, too, often looked forward to the summer when he would see them in bloom. At the corner she asked him if he would come in, but he was sorry, he could not. Then they lingered a moment, and she thanked him for the afternoon.

" Take care of yourself," he said.

He seemed preoccupied. She freed her hand, smiled at him, and turned away, and he watched her walking up the street.

He had been thinking of his play until the moment they parted, and then it struck him as strange that, when he thought of her so continually, and when there was everything in her to love, he loved her only with his affections. He had scanned her face at the end, thinking how there was nothing in her that was not made to be loved, and when she had left him he wanted to say, " God bless you !" She was at once an inspiration and a dearly loved sister.

He wrote with his mind, and not with his emotions,

Digitized by Google

and judged his own work by very high standards. Also he believed in his talent, and looked upon himself as a mere instrument to it, and his writing was never a direct reflection of himself; with the exception of one play, which he wrote when he was very young—only twenty-two or three, and which was called *The Lar*.

He was at that time clerk in the German branch of a London house, and he boarded with a family in Breslau. The family consisted of a married couple and their daughter, a girl a little younger than himself. She was sullen-looking, with the pale, unhealthy complexion of a flower that has been grown in the dark, and in the beginning he hardly ever heard her speak. She did a good deal of the house work, and as she went about the house he could hear the faint clapping of her shabby slippers. At meals he looked at her, trying to see her eyes. Perhaps the first time he was conscious of doing this was at supper one evening, when, shading her face with one hand, she played with the fingers of the other upon the table-cloth, and he wondered when she lifted her eyes what colour they would be. He watched her attentively but furtively for several minutes, and at last she looked up at him. Her eyes were greenish, under straight, low brows that nearly joined together, and that seemed just then to be drawn into a frown. Her mouth drooped downwards, but he liked the folds of her dark brown hair, which lay as closely to her small head as its wings to a bird.

After she had met his eyes she looked away, and he could never again find her looking at him, but during meals he was always conscious of her presence. And when they crossed as he went in or out of the house, he sometimes spoke to her; but she answered in monosyllables, often shrugging her shoulders.

After a time he noticed that something was wrong with her parents. It was easy to discover that the father drank, but he did not find out so quickly what was the matter with the mother. She had become intensely excitable, and if anyone spoke to her unexpectedly she

Digitized by Google

would jump. On the evenings when the father had drunk too much his wife would tell the maid-servant to help him up to his room and see that he went to bed, and then she would send her daughter to bed too. Young Carfrae always went to his room after supper, and read till very late. But the wife never went upstairs till he had read for some time, and when he noticed that this was a habit he listened more attentively, and every night he heard a door downstairs close and a key turn before she came up.

One Saturday night she did not come up till two o'clock. The next morning, being Sunday and a holiday, he went down very late, but the family was still assembled at breakfast. It was a dark morning, and the lamp was lit and stood in the middle of the table, and as no one spoke there was a rattle of knives and plates.

"I wouldn't be surprised if somebody had come into the house last night," said the father. "I heard steps."

"It was the wind. Didn't you hear it?" said the mother, turning to Carfrae.

"It may have been the wind. I know I didn't sleep very well."

"The wind was very loud."

The voices paused again, and young Carfrae listened to the father noisily stirring his coffee, which he pushed away from him and did not drink.

Suddenly the mother gave a shriek.

"The cat has jumped on my lap!" she cried, throwing it off from her. Then she repeated, "I hate the horrid beast to jump on my lap."

No one answered her, and the daughter got up from the table, and taking a pile of dirty plates went into the scullery to wash them.

Carfrae went uptairs again, slowly, pausing upon the landing and looking downwards into the dark well of the stairs to see if anyone were following him. But no one came. He went into his rooms, but left the door open, and then he walked to the window where he stood watching the rain fall. Soon he heard, on the ground floor, the

Digitized by Google

little clapping of those out-at-heel slippers, and then he heard them on the stairs; he could tell when they touched the wood of the steps and when she kept to the narrow carpet. . . . On his landing they stopped. He turned, as the girl came into the room. She did not shut the door, but leaning against the wall she stood with her arms hanging and her eyes fixed. . . . He had meant to speak to her, but he said nothing. He turned again to the window, and yet he could not stand with his back to her, and he looked around once more; she was still leaning against the wall, but she had folded her arms and was looking at him.

Her lips were full and sank in at the corners, where there were shadows, and there was a slight cleft in her chin; she had drawn her brows together and was staring from under them. He trembled, and felt his soul was bare. Then abruptly she left the room and he tried to hear where she went. She had shut the door, but later he opened it again, for he thought she was on the landing. Yet there was no one there.

He stayed indoors all that day, and every now and then he would feel something in him that pushed him to open his door and listen, and that night, when everyone had gone to bed (and the mother went early, too, at ten o'clock), he stood outside his room for a long time. The kitchen clock ticked so loudly he could hear nothing but that, and he longed for it to stop, he did not know why.

In his spare hours he was fond of studying, and in a book on Roman religion he learned for the first time about that "Lar Familiaris," which was the familiar spirit of a house, the protector of one roof-tree. And this idea of a protecting genius in every house appealed irresistibly to the young Carfrae's imagination. As the idea took possession of him it seemed to him that there were times when one felt the presence of the Lar as one lived in a house; that on occasions of rejoicing one felt a sudden increase of happiness in oneself, and that was the Lar who was rejoicing, and whose joy communicated itself back to the mortals under its protection. And in times of sorrow one could distinguish, in the desolation of

Digitized by Google

the house, the passage of the grieving spirit from whom a mortal had escaped to disappear out of its sphere into the domain of greater gods. Carfrae went so far as to think that when the members of a household sinned the Lar would be disturbed, and he was sure those following days that this spirit in their house had been outraged, and that it wandered from room to room seeking what it feared, and though invisible, was dominating and furious. The idea was so vivid that he was obliged to write about it, and in one of the scenes the girl came into the man's room and leaned against the wall, without speaking to him. He sat with his pen in his hand, wondering how, through the mouth of one of the other characters, he could describe her, the sinking of her lips at the corners, her cleft chin, and the modelling of her cheeks.

He did not speak to her about the Lar, but he felt that she knew; it was as if they two and the offended spirit watched together.... But in a very few days the girl was sent away. He did not even know she was going, but one night when he came home from the office where he worked, and joined the family at supper, she was not there. He asked if he should not call her, and then her mother told him that an aunt of theirs had paid them a visit that day and had asked to take the girl with her to Berlin, where she would be taught dressmaking; the trunk had been packed in an hour and they had caught the evening train.

He waited for a time thinking she would write to him. He did not dare ask her mother for the address, but for a whole fortnight he felt sure, every day, that he would get a letter from her. It never came, and because something in the house suffocated him he left, and he had an idea the Lar was sad, and that it followed him about to the end, grieving.

For as long as a year he waited to hear from her, and then he lost hope, but in a way he never forgot her. Women in their romantic capacity were not necessary to his existence; he seemed very self-sufficient, and his memory of her as she leaned against the wall of his room was never entirely effaced by other memories. And he always

Digitized by Google

remembered with a kind of horror the aspect of the untidy supper-table that night they told him she had gone away. . . .

Blanche sat all the rest of that afternoon in her room; once or twice when she heard a step in the passage outside she thought it might be the porteress come to tell her she had another visitor. But no one came.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VIII

A FEW mornings later she was leaving the elocution class that, at Carfrae's wish, she attended several times a week when she remembered that Crookby's shop, where Julian had first seen her, was not very far from her teacher's house near Trafalgar Square, and a desire to see it again came over her. As she made her way to Farawell Street she thought that perhaps—there was one chance in about a thousand—Julian might be there, or while she was there he might come in and ask for a book. And yet that was impossible; such things did not happen.

Roofs and chimneys grouped themselves ever anew against the sulphur-yellow sky, and an ever-changing vision of the streets moved on through her consciousness. The fog hung low, but behind it was a sort of diffused luminosity, and suddenly, as the street opened and she saw into the Strand, the sun appeared, like a dull red wafer pasted in the sky above the light grey tower of St. Clement-Danes. The roar of the streets kept alive in her a feeling of fear, a kind of excitement, and it seemed as if this visit to Crookby's were not just a casual incident of the morning, as it would appear to be, but something rather reckless, an almost compromising thing to do. . . . And when Farawell Street, with its odd bend and its picturesque outline, lay before her, and when she caught sight of the quaintly gabled front next door to Crookby's, she felt a kind of embarrassment, of constraint with herself for having come.

She paused on the narrow pavement, and little by little she was drawn to the window, and looked in, pretending to read the titles of the books that were exposed to view. She pretended as if all the street were watching her. She

Digitized by Google

thought she saw old Crookby at his desk, but there was no one else in the shop.

Then she caught sight of a clock and hurried away.

The afternoon grew fine, and, remembering George's injunctions she took a walk. She was on her way home when, turning a corner, she saw Julian walking up the street ahead of her. Her feet stood still for a second. It was hardly as though she recognized him—recognized by his back, his shoulders, and the way he walked, that it was he—but as though on turning the corner she had instantly known he was there. She stopped because it seemed so extraordinary, and then she was borne onwards as if by a wave. She was conscious of nothing except that he was going to turn his head and see her, and just as she caught up with him at the crossing he turned as if suddenly impelled, and their eyes met. She was close behind him, smiling a little with what seemed her usual serenity.

"You were going to see me," she said.

He wanted to answer, "I could not keep away," but it was what he had determined not to say, and he replied: "You will let me come back with you, won't you ?"

They crossed the street, which was a busy one, and he was conscious of protecting her. On the other side she added: "And I went to Crookby's this morning."

"Do you often go there ?" he asked.

"I have not been since the day we first met each other."

"I have been only once since. And what book did you get ?"

"I did not get any. I only looked in."

He was moved. She had raised her eyes again, and it was so often and so simply that they met his.

But since last seeing her he had decided on a course to take. He must see her, he felt the necessity of seeing her, and yet he could not continue in the way he had begun. Two more meetings, and he might be telling her he loved her, and the pleasure he took in her was not one to be increased by that. It was a more elusive, a more delicate pleasure. It was odd, but he no longer wanted to make

Digitized by Google

love to her. He wanted to see her as she was more than to discover what she might be to him.

So he imagined enjoying another kind of relationship with her, one that he had never dreamed before could exist between a man and a woman, but which she seemed to make possible. He imagined conversations he would have with her that would lead them into some garden of the spirit; but because between a man and a woman there must always enter, at times, some thought of love, though it may remain for ever unexpressed, he had anticipated the moment when they would not be able to look at each other for fear of the secret that might be revealed in their eyes. In an idyllic friendship he was, perhaps, to find the most perfect romance of his life. Yet when he met her again he could not help wondering how much she had thought of him since Cecil's dinner, and why she had gone to Crookby's shop. Did it not sound like a pilgrimage ?

"Must we go back to the convent ?" he said. "It could quite decently be called tea-time, and we could have tea somewhere together."

His spirits rose, and he said gaily: "I am afraid of Reverend Mother, I think."

She laughed.

"It can only be her influence that you are afraid of, for did I not tell you Reverend Mother was quite bed-ridden ? She never leaves her two rooms; she is carried every morning to her sofa in the office, and there she stays all day. Sister Ethelburga carries her in as easily as if she were a child."

In order to catch every inflection of her voice he more and more slackened his walk, and unconsciously she fell into the same pace.

"Dear Mother ! it is a miracle how she can live. She is always in pain, but no one would ever know it, and she can manage the whole convent from her sofa. Father Dudley was saying only the other day that she had the mind of a man. And I think her influence is felt all over the house, so when you said you were afraid of her I felt

Digitized by Google

it was quite possible, that if she did not approve of your coming, you could feel it, even in the parlour where she has not been for seven years."

"But she cannot disapprove of my coming! I should think she would be glad that you had made a friend who would always be ready to help you, should you need it—who would think it the greatest honour in the world to be allowed to help you."

"Are you that friend?"

"If you will let me be."

"I am your friend, too, if you will let me—if only you would let me be of help to you! I have thought how beautiful it would be if you would let me—if I could be allowed. . . . Do you know, I thought the other night, if a man had found an inexhaustible treasure how he would want to spend his life in saying to people: 'Oh, come, come! You would all be rich if you only would come and take! If you only knew! If you would only come and see!' And when they would not come, how he would weep!"

An inner conflict of feeling kept him silent.

When she spoke like this, he had an instant desire that she should not. There was everything in the world to talk about, and these things were the only things in the world he did not wish to hear. This was not the garden of the spirit he had intended. And yet, on the other hand, when she spoke of her faith he seemed to enter with her into another world. Suddenly and unexpectedly he remembered his childhood, without cynicism or amusement; it was as if he were on the verge of having his childhood explained to him, or as if he were about to have a glimpse into something he had never wanted to know of before.

As for Blanche, she did not know why she had spoken of her hope of influencing him. But, meeting him suddenly, the ideas she had had about him took shape. When her eyes rested on his face she instinctively sought for an explanation as to why they had wished to rest there, and those words came to her lips. It seemed to her

Digitized by Google

as she spoke that she was explaining to him why she had thought of him so much. Then, having spoken, she was no longer sure of why she had done so. She was made conscious of herself in wondering whether she ought to have spoken, and whether it were not too soon, and whether he were annoyed with her for speaking. What she had done appeared extraordinary to her, and she was struck to the heart with a sharp unhappiness.

"Mrs. Benwell," he began, and they were both aware of how strange it sounded that he should call her *Mrs. Benwell*.

"Do not answer," she said. "What I have said cannot be answered. Let us speak of other things."

He was amazed at an intuition he had not expected, and at once an idyllic friendship with her offered an even greater prospect of beauty. And to help him further he saw the name of a tea-shop up the street, and he again suggested that they should have tea.

In a little empty room, with photographs of the Royal Family on the walls and a table with a white cloth between them, this new opportunity of talking to each other filled them both with wonder, and yet at first they could say nothing. Her unhappiness had vanished like a cloud, and she was again unconscious of herself. She wanted to ask him questions, and the things that she wanted to know filled all the silence for her. But she was still shy of asking, and instead he asked her about herself.

She answered absently, thinking of him, but he learnt that on three afternoons a week she went to read to an old lady who was almost blind, and that on four mornings a week she took lessons with a friend of Carfrae's, who taught elocution.

"They are rather expensive," she said. "I ought really to find something else to do till the play is produced."

She took it quite for granted that it would in time be produced.

He had no idea how much money she had, and in a way he would have liked to know. He was sometimes curious

Digitized by Google

as to whether it were alimony she received, or whether she had money of her own. He wanted to know, too, how much one received for reading aloud to a blind old lady several hours at a time. But he dared not ask, and then, in another way, she seemed more perfect if one did not know. For the same reason it was better not to find out who had been her people, and in what surroundings she had lived; and after the conversation they had had about her marriage it was impossible to ask her about that. He could never again mention her husband, if she did not do so herself.

She had said that her elocution teacher's house was not far from the National Gallery, and at once he remembered it could not be far from Crookby's either.

"Did you go to Crookby's from there?"

"Yes; it was because it was so near that I went."

Did it still sound like a pilgrimage, he thought?

"Could we not go to Crookby's together one morning when you have had your lesson? There is another book I would so like to give you. . . . And I would so like to choose it with you. And then one morning we might go to the National Gallery."

A hundred other opportunities for seeing her opened out to him.

She did not think it would be wrong to go to Crookby's and the National Gallery with him, and even for him to come again to see her at home. They arranged to meet the following Wednesday after her lesson. He would fetch her there, and immediately she looked forward to the morning when she would run down the stairs of her teacher's house, knowing for certain that Julian was waiting for her outside. Even, in her suddenly kindled imagination, she had a vision of him already, walking up and down the street. . . .

When her eyes rested on him he sometimes wondered whether she really saw him, or whether she were not, in spirit, many miles away—where, he could not tell. Perhaps one day he would be able so to understand her that, in quick flashes of sympathy, he would see with her

Digitized by Google

eyes and realize her atmosphere. There was magic in the hope. Perhaps one day she would understand him; that comprehension he had dreamed—that kind of intimacy he had always wanted. . . . She quickened his realization of it, and he saw quite clearly what he had desired. There was no spiritual desire that her face did not promise to fulfil.

They had sat a long time at their table, and a waitress came to take away the tray and the little Japanese cups and saucers of thin porcelain. She handed Julian the bill, and as he paid he remembered that it was friendship he had promised himself to enjoy with Blanche, not love; not love to be declared and fled from.

She woke from her vision, and said she must go. He gave her the gloves she had dropped, and she drew down her veil, and they went out into the street, which was bluish-purple in the February twilight.

He left her at the convent door.

On Wednesday morning it threatened rain, but that could not deter him, and he waited at the corner she had indicated, smiling with amusement at his own expectation. That she carried an umbrella did not make her appearance prosaic, and he was glad he had come when she talked to him quite gaily, about her lessons, her teacher, and her fellow-pupils. She did not yet recite in class; she had not got further than pronunciation exercises, she who might within a few months be called upon to take a leading part! It would have been so much better if she could have studied another year or two. But if Mr. Eames would like to hear her, she would recite to him privately some day.

"Will you recite 'Hide-and-Seek' for me?"

"Did you like it so much?"

"Yes; and then you recited it the first time I met you. That alone would make it interesting."

She took any homage he gave her so quietly that it was an almost irresistible temptation to give her more; but, keeping in mind the determination he had made in regard to her, he refrained from it.

Digitized by Google

Speaking of that day at Mrs. James's reminded him of Cecil. Had she seen him lately? He did not tell her he felt rather uncomfortable about Cecil, for the latter had not come near him since the night of his dinner, and that seemed to show that their talk in the library had been most unfavourably taken.

She told him that Mr. Armathwaite was in the country; he had gone up North, where he had a big place that needed attending to, and he would not be back for at least a fortnight. But he had written her that he would be back for an engagement she had to recite towards the middle of March.

She looked round at Julian in the shelter of her umbrella, one hand holding up her long black skirt, a high dark fur collar fastened under her chin.

He as a rule abhorred shabbiness in women, yet Blanche's fur was worn, and her gloves were mended; and walking beside her, he minded the damp and the mud not a whit. Who could not like her hat when that soft blonde hair lay beneath it, or dislike a dress that set off so well the shell-like fairness of her skin?

He was interested to know that she was going to recite again, and wished to hear when and where it would be. One engagement sometimes led to another, and a lady to whom Mr. Armathwaite presented her at Mrs. James's had written to her just lately. George was going to advise her what to recite, and this she would submit to Lady Dickenson.

"Won't you let me hear it, too?"—and they arranged that one afternoon she would rehearse her pieces for him.

They went into Crookby's wondering what the old man would think at seeing them together, when they had not met the last time they were there, but he did not seem to recognize them at all.

In the inner room they forgot him; they were sure he would not hear.

A step-ladder was leaning on the shelves, and she rested against it as they talked. It was such a dull day that it

Digitized by Google

strained the eyes to read the titles of the books, and he soon gave up his search.

"It is always dark when I come here," he said. "The first time, I remember, I had to make the old man light the gas—— "

He remembered his sensation while Crookby was lighting the gas of having experienced the moment once before, and he thought of telling Blanche, but the incident was too slight, and he let it pass. The leisure was delicious that allowed him to choose what he would say to her, or to leave a pause when he preferred it. There were long pauses between them.

He savoured the interest which, when one cared for a woman, lay in all one could say to her or hear from her lips, and aloud he spoke of the silences that, between friends, can mean a perfect sympathy. She had not been aware of a silence, and though his words said the contrary she grew afraid she had not talked enough, but she could not think of anything to say. She seemed to be in a dream.

They left Crookby's with a book on Rome, illustrated with woodcuts, wrapped in a piece of newspaper, and they parted, again at the convent door, knowing they would meet within a few days.

He met her three times again outside her elocution teacher's, and they went once more to Crookby's, but he did not always take her back to Kensington. She told him it was much better not to come all the way back with her, and he obeyed, for the fear of Reverend Mother was with him; but he was sure Blanche was as afraid of her conscience as she was of her confessor, and she would have to delude her conscience as well as the windows of the convent.

If he had not been so anxious to know how introspective she was, and if the problem of what she felt towards him had not continually presented itself, he would have quite fulfilled his own ideal of friendship with her. He did not wish the affair to go any further, but he would have liked it to continue for ever; her look when she first caught sight of him, each time he went to meet her, was each time a

Digitized by Google

memorable thing, and he thought he could never tire of it, any more than he could tire of the dawn. Yet he was sure she did not know it was love, for though he was cynical, his cynicism did not mislead him in his perception of Blanche, and if ever she realized it was love he knew she would refuse to see him again.

But he had slipped so easily into her life that the fact of his companionship did not alarm her. It was as though she had looked once and found a friend, and when he was there she could but be thankful for him. And because they knew they could see each other neither suffered from the restlessness of uncertainty; they even became accustomed to the idea of each other. Walking together in a radius of streets that soon became familiar to them, he spoke of things that she could understand, occasionally appealing to her imagination and watching anxiously to see to what extent it would awaken.

After she read the book on Rome that he had given her, he talked of Italy. He wished he had known her there, for he would have liked to meet her in one of those gardens, in a wood of ilex-trees. And yet perhaps her face and colouring were too Greek; those ilex-groves were too Latin for her. Only Latin poetry could express them. He made, as usual, no more than a passing allusion to her beauty, and soon was reciting a fragment of Virgil, and while he formed the redundant Latin words with pleasure he fed upon the admiration in her eyes. She wanted to know the English of the quotation, and he asked her if it did not bring back Italy to think of the Muses on their Aonian hill, and of the shrine of marble built on the green meadow by the waterside. He had always felt that he was about to see the shepherd leading his flocks to the water of the oak-trough deep with moss, "about the groves of Silarus, and Alburnus evergreen with ilex . . . ." And though he used the language of the letters he had written from abroad it came easily to him, and knowing she would never accuse him of affectation he became almost unaffected in it.

She was dismayed to think how unobservant she had

Digitized by Google

been, but when he pressed her to speak she told him of the convent garden and its eucalyptus-trees, the stone bench where she used to sit, and the little fountain. They had both remained in Rome throughout the month of June, and had known the heat of the long days, and the pleasure of lifting the heavy leather curtain that masked a church door and entering, out of the blaze of the street, the coolness and dimness of a marble aisle.

They knew, when they became silent, that they were thinking of the same scenes, and in the recollections of a place which they had beheld with very different eyes there was a bond.

As the day for her confession drew near she searched her conscience with regard to her friendship with Julian, but she did not think it need trouble her. She would tell Father Dudley everything of course, just as she had told him about George Carfrae and Cecil Armathwaite, but she thought that just as he had permitted her to see the other men he would permit her to see Julian.

Father Dudley was to be found at the Oratory, and as soon as she entered the church she saw him in one of the side chapels, directing the redecoration of an altar. When he saw her he smiled, and she waited till he could come to speak to her; then they walked up the church together, he carrying his biretta absent-mindedly in his hand, she moving more quickly than he in an intense anticipation.

The door of the presbytery—on the left of the altar in the chapel of St. Philip of Neri—let them into a long passage having a row of doors along the left-hand side. Each door had upper panels of glass, and without going in they were able to see that the second parlour was empty. It was a bare, severe place with a table in the middle and half a dozen chairs around it; a few pious prints were on the walls, but a Japanese paper umbrella in the empty grate struck an incongruous note of triviality.

The priest had been speaking quite cheerfully of mundane matters till he closed the door, and then there was a sudden silence. As he put on his stole she went over to the window, where the sight of the London-blackened trees,

Digitized by Google

the asphalt drive, and the high, prison-like wall shutting out all view of the street—an outlook hard and grey as iron on that wintry morning—was connected in her mind with the joy of her confessions, and while her heart beat her eyes seemed to be drinking in beauty. Then she turned, and with little steps, as though the place were holy, she went to kneel on the other side of the screen that was fastened at right angles to the wall; and as she began to speak there shone in the priest's face, a narrow face, extraordinarily purified and refined, the tenderness of one who feels it is given him to heal.

When she arose from her knees they seated themselves at the table, for he had gathered that she wanted to talk to him as to a friend. He also felt that Absolution had not left her quite as happy as usual, and he encouraged her to speak by assuring her he had nothing pressing to do for another half-hour.

She spoke at first, a little vaguely, of the religious life, and the desire she once had had to possess the vocation, but how it seemed now as if her duty lay in the world. Then she broke off with—

"But, Father, are there not many pitfalls in the life of the stage?"

"Dear child, in what life are there no pitfalls? Are there no pitfalls even in the religious life, which at present you desire, but for which you do not feel you have received sufficient grace? To what can we attain without temptations? If in the life of the stage you should feel the presence of temptations, you would not need to despair. You might feel alarmed if you felt a failing strength to meet those temptations, but even then it would not be necessary to flee. Until you realized you had no strength left you would not need to flee. My dear child, I am one of those who do not believe in fleeing. I see that on all sides, in whatever life we choose, there are temptations, and I would rather see a man or a woman march up to them and conquer them than try to escape from them by other paths. We have not spoken of this for some time, and I want to remind you that, when it was first sug-

Digitized by Google

gested that you should go on the stage, and when you first asked me if I were not afraid for you of the temptations that might occur, I said: 'If there are any, overcome them!' and I want to tell you again that, if I thought you had not sufficient strength, I would not have said that. To many a woman who asked me that question I would not have said, 'Overcome them!' I would have said: 'Protect yourself!' For I believe in courage, but I do not believe in foolhardiness. I am well aware that in the frailty of our natures we might be led towards dangerous desires by the specious argument that we must not acknowledge danger, and that it is our duty to brave it. That is a grave danger with many of us. But it does not exist in your case. I believe you are open and clear-hearted, and that you have strength to resist evil."

His look on her was like a benediction. "Therefore," he went on after a pause, "when it was suggested that you should go on the stage, we—all of us who are concerned in your welfare—considered the matter very deeply. It was necessary that you should do something to support yourself and your little niece, and I thought, perhaps, that what you earned in one year on the stage would go towards several years of your simple expenses. Is that not so?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"You are better paid on the stage than going as a companion, which was the only alternative that was offered to you?"

She inclined her head again, drinking in the sound of his voice and the comfort he emanated, and resting in the peace of the presbytery parlour. With Father Dudley she felt she was being held up by strong hands to a clearer and more illuminating vision of eternity; with one hand he held her, and with the other he pointed to the earth and to her duties upon it, and, following his finger as it were, she saw her own path more plainly indicated through the bewildering maze of life.

"I thought that perhaps two or three years on the stage, if you had a leading part and were well paid, would

Digitized by Google

give you enough to live on, simply, as you must, for the remainder of your life. But, my dear child, have you conceived a repulsion for the idea of life on the stage? If you have, it is certainly not your duty to do violence to it. If you have a feeling of repulsion to the idea, it is perhaps a sign that you should not adopt the life. I feel that the voice of our heart is often the means of telling us God's will."

She drew her brow's together in an effort to answer him perfectly truthfully, and said it was not exactly a feeling of repulsion. It was a feeling of fear.

"I know many priests would refuse their sanction to such a life, but I do not see that the theatrical life is necessarily an evil one. But what you must decide, my dear child, is whether you wish to pursue it or not, and whether this fear of yours comes from shyness, self-depreciation in your art, or from a knowledge of hidden weakness."

Her eyes had an inward look, and during the pause which he gave her she seemed to be deeply thinking.

"Do you think, Father, if I gave up the stage for lack of courage, it would be wrong?"

"Not wrong, for, after all, you can support yourself and your little niece in other ways. No, not wrong; you are perfectly free to choose your own way of bread-winning. I have told you, of course, and you feel it yourself, that you could never act in a play that was contrary to morality or religion, or that ridiculed the word of God. But you have talent, and it may be in your hands to confer innocent pleasure. I think the stage has great possibilities of uplifting a public that it is otherwise difficult to reach."

"Father," she said suddenly, "you make it seem easy for me to decide. Yes, if I can make money to educate Mary, to make life a little softer for her, it is my duty to conquer my shyness, my fear. It is my dream, you know, to have a little house . . ."

She had to pause, and then when she could she went on:

". . . To have a little house where I can live with Mary

Digitized by Google

during the six months of the year I have her! It was that dream that made me consent that first time to go on tour. For myself alone I would never have had the courage. . . ."

She brushed the tears from her eyes, and looking at her fingers that were wet, she tried to laugh.

"How foolish I am!" she said. "Father, you must forgive me."

"We have not spoken of the stage for a long time, for you seemed to be reconciled to the idea, even looking forward to acting in Mr. Carfrae's play. What is it that has suddenly made you afraid?"

Colour rose in her face, and she hesitated; she was afraid that she was keeping the whole truth from him, but it was difficult to answer, as she must:

"Father, in meeting those men of whom I spoke to you in my confession, I wondered if I, in my position, were doing right——"

"But we settled that if you meet them but occasionally, and if, in your intercourse with them and in your most secret thoughts with yourself, you regard them only as a wife should regard all other men but her husband, I cannot see that there is any wrong. For if you live in the world, you must meet the people of the world! But it may not be necessary for you to see these men very often."

"As I told you, there is a reason why I should meet two of these men. They are both connected with the part I am going to take in the play. I told you in my confession all the times I had met this other man, but I did not tell you that he interested me because he was brought up in our Holy Church, and has lost grace. He no longer believes. And when I heard that, I felt perhaps it might be given to me, it might be vouchsafed——" Again she could not go on, for she was walking with Julian up a little street; carriages were passing; there was life in the air. She was saying almost those very words to him, but she could not remember how he had answered. What was it he said?

Digitized by Google

Her brows again were knit as she looked at the priest, and then she became conscious of his voice, which was saying:

"My dear child, there is more danger in proselytising than you are aware. Coming into contact with a man of the world, plausible and intelligent, if with a misguided intelligence, there is danger that some insidious question may trouble you—may throw you into doubt. I am somewhat afraid of a man and a woman arguing on such matters, for a woman . . ."

He smiled, and his grey eyes narrowed, disarmingly, into rays of light.

"The woman is not always mistress of her facts, nor is she able to discriminate always between the true and the false. I would never suggest to a woman to try to lead a man back to faith, unless it were by the example of her life."

A voice in her asked, "Then am I not to see him?" and for a second she thought she had spoken. For she was aware of a silence, and she knew that she might speak, and yet she had not said a word. She tried to speak, but the room seemed to swim before her, and she asked herself: "What is it I should have said?" She pushed back her chair, and knew that she was trembling.

"My child, what is your trouble?" he said.

"None, Father; I am in no trouble."

"Perhaps there is a greater menace in this man's friendship than I realized. If he troubles you, you must not see him."

"I did not think he troubled me, Father. I do not believe he troubles me. But suddenly . . ."

She did not know what she wished to say, but with the eyes of the mind she seemed to be looking into emptiness.

"Has this man raised any doubts in your mind, or tried in any way to undermine your faith?"

"Oh no! Oh, never that! Whenever we have spoken of religion, it is I who have done so."

"As your confessor I saw no actual moral wrong in your friendship with this man, but as your friend I must

Digitized by Google

ask you if you think it is wise, though I do not want you to be shut away from all human companionship; but, as I said, you must consider the voice of the world as well as that of your conscience. We settled that you must not meet this man except when he came to see you in the convent, but if you think now that he has been in any way the cause of your trouble, do not see him at all. Do not see him in any case for a fortnight, and at the end of that time you may be surer of yourself."

There was a long silence, and then he rose; and as she rose, too, he took her hands in his and smiled down at her. The warmth of his hands was communicated to her and flowed into her veins, but her eyelids dropped, for she was feeling giddy.

"I do not wish to be too lenient with you," he said, "I think you have sometimes thought me very lenient, but with your tender conscience I feel I must reassure you, not chide you, as I do my other penitents."

Then he released her, and she made an effort to look up. This was the presbytery parlour she had learned to love, and Father Dudley was smiling at her intently.

She bade him good-bye, and in a sudden failure of courage her steps led her back into the church.

The row of votive tapers sent a thin white flame into the dull air, and was the only point of beauty in those vast spaces and in all that tarnished pretentiousness. Occasionally steps along the stone aisles echoed in a cold, unsympathetic silence, and then the intoning of a priest rose and fell on the ear. But to Blanche the Oratory was neither ugly nor unsympathetic, and she was not conscious of it as she knelt. How long she knelt she did not afterwards know, and after she had risen she stood for a time in rapt contemplation of the Monstrance on the High Altar.

Then the tension of her mind gradually relaxed, and the thought of Julian possessed it consciously. Father Dudley had said she must not see him for a fortnight, but she tried to think only of the work for the poor she had set herself to do, and the pious reading the priest had

Digitized by Google

recommended to her. She must not walk with him any more; she must not meet him at Crookby's. How was she to tell him that she must not meet him any more outside her elocution teacher's ? There was no sequence in the thoughts that fluttered in her brain. At one moment she seemed to have found comfort, and to be holding her life in her two hands, ready to offer it to Father Dudley. Then the next moment she remembered that in her confession he had not found her friendship with Julian wrong, but had merely warned her that in her walks with him she was giving the world an opportunity to criticize her. It was only afterwards, when she brought Julian's name into their friendly conversation, that he advised her not to see him for a fortnight. If only she had not spoken of him again ! She stood still, almost appalled at herself. What had come over her that she should think such things ? Was she trying to escape from her duty ? But perhaps the thought had been involuntary, and she was not responsible for it. . . .

She was in Cromwell Road, and the broad vista of sombre houses had nothing in it to distract her. There was nothing in the world of sufficient interest to take her thoughts away from Julian. But the thought of him was able to dispel some of her sadness, for suddenly she began to smile to herself, remembering something he had said that had amused her.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IX

It was evident that the only way to avoid him was to miss her Friday lesson, for it was after Friday's lesson that he was to have met her. But, though she knew she could not choose but obey Father Dudley, the whole of Thursday she argued with herself as to whether it would not be better for her to go. Ought she to miss her lesson? Was it so sure that he would meet her? The idea of going, after all, continued like an obsession, and she became used to it, though she never ceased to struggle against the temptation. She was alarmed at being even tempted, but the alarm was caused by the idea of contemplating disobedience, not because the desire to disobey contained a terrifying revelation in itself. It did not point, for her, to any proof that she thought of Julian other, as Father Dudley would have said, than as a married woman should think of a man who was not her husband. She had so little experience in such things that none of the signs along the road were legible to her. And her mind was not one that worked very clearly or sharply; she saw the world, other people, and herself, always through the softening medium of her ideality.

On Friday morning she had nothing to do, and, unoccupied and unhappy, she went for a walk. Though she tried to restrain her imagination she could not keep it from running on what might have been; and now she could not persuade herself that he would not be there. She lived through the whole morning as it would have been—first the class, and then her fellow-pupils saying good-bye to each other on the doorstep. She heard the door close behind her, she took a short-cut into Trafalgar Square. . . .

Digitized by Google

Suddenly she turned round and hurried home, for no real reason, as even if he missed her and came to see what was the matter he could not be there before half-past twelve. For a moment she had forgotten she must not see him if he came, and after she had remembered again it was a relief to think of Sister Catherine and to go in search of someone who would talk to her.

Sister Catherine was the *Sœur Économe*—it was a French order, though many of the nuns were English—and her duties included the housekeeping and such "social work" as visiting the boarders and seeing they were comfortable. Blanche found her in the room adjoining the boarders' dining-room, where their table linen was kept, putting table-cloths away in a big cupboard, to reach the top shelves of which she was standing on a chair. Blanche asked if she could help, and handed the pieces up to her out of a large basket, and it was something to do to refold a dozen napkins into a better shape.

The walls were plainly distempered, and there was only cocoanut-matting on the floor. Two grated windows looked out upon a garden, and between the windows stood a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows. The room was full of a chill brightness and the peculiar odour of newly washed linen.

Blanche's friend was a rather tall woman, so slight that her habit dropped loosely about her, and as she lifted her arms to the top shelf their thinness showed under the black veil that hung over her shoulders. She had tied a pair of scissors on a string to her girdle, and they clinked against her rosary when she moved.

Her hands were practical, but the gentle expression in her eyes explained the fancies she had, and the stories she was able to tell the children. And of all the children who came, Blanche's little niece Mary was her favourite. She used to cut out paper dolls for her, and send her holy pictures and home-made cake.

She asked Blanche when the little girl would be home for her holidays, and was sorry to hear not before Easter, and then only for a week or two.

Digitized by Google

"But I am going there on Sunday for the day," said Blanche, and she stood still, wondering why she was unhappy.

"How badly they wash here!" exclaimed Sister Catherine. "See what a bad colour the linen is! Quite yellow! You should have seen the linen in our house in France—it was like snow."

Then she laughed, and looked down at Blanche with a ripple of amusement.

"That is the fourth time I have mentioned the linen in our house in France within three days! I must really pay Mother a forfeit the next time it slips out!"

They stayed together till lunch-time, when Sister Catherine returned to the Community, and Blanche went back to the dining-room where the ladies were already assembling for the meal.

It was Lent, and several ladies had come just for a week or so to make a retreat; one had arrived only that morning, and two others had come together a few days before, and were evidently "seeing" London, and trying not to let it appear that they were not Londoners.

They entered the room with one of the ladies who was making a retreat, all three talking of some church that they had seen abroad.

"I don't know why one has such a particular feeling about it," said the oldest of the three, and having reached her place she paused to cross herself before sitting down, after which she resumed her sentence:

"It may be the miraculous picture, or the fact that Father Danage was converted there."

"I always think that is such an interesting story," said the lady who was making a retreat, but the other two, the travelling companions, had begun to examine their napkins and to discuss which napkin-ring belonged to which. One of the two had white hair and was plainly dressed, while her friend wore a dark fringe carefully netted, a bright blue gown, and a good deal of jewellery. They both glanced sharply round the table as if to see whether any one had a cleaner napkin or a larger piece of bread.

Digitized by Google

Their talk subsided as Mrs. Ashby took her seat opposite and swept them with a look. They felt her hostility, and when she began to talk to her right-hand neighbour in a loud voice the two friends, realizing that they were excluded, continued an earnest conversation between themselves.

Mrs. Ashby's right-hand neighbour, the lady who had arrived that morning, was silent because she had been told that one of the boarders was an actress and a divorced woman, and she was trying to guess which of the people present was the outcast. Looking greedily round the table she for a moment suspected the wearer of the bright blue dress, as her face betrayed a layer of powder, but that unprepossessing exterior seemed an exculpation in itself, and she came to the conclusion the actress had not yet appeared.

Just then a lady, quite a young woman, whom she had never seen, entered and noiselessly approached the table, without any rustle of skirts or jingling of bangles. Mrs. Ashby's bangles jingled continually.

"Late again, Mrs. Benwell!" she said, and the lady who had arrived that morning tried in a painful flutter to remember whether the actress's name had ever been told her.

"You must excuse me," said the newcomer in a low voice, as she slipped into the last place at the table.

The two friends having well studied the last arrival once more began talking brightly to each other.

"I wonder," said the one with white hair, "if Sister Ursula is going to read aloud to-day. I suppose she does it to remind us we are in a convent and not in a hotel!"

"I rather like it," answered the other, who would evidently so much have preferred a hotel that she was obliged to pretend she came to a convent from choice and not for economy.

The door at the other end of the long, echoing room opened at last to give passage to a very tall nun carrying a book under her arm, and at once Mrs. Ashby ushered in with a "That reminds me——" an anecdote about her

Digitized by Google

husband which gave every sign of being lengthy and complicated.

The nun brought a chair up to the window, and with her foot moved a mat towards herself over the beeswaxed floor; then, as the chatter continued, she cleared her throat, and having coughed twice, she said aloud: "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

She sat down, crossing her feet on the little mat, and holding herself very stiff and erect, and in a high, clear voice she announced from the book upon her lap: " 'Life of the Venerable Hubert Gregorovius,' by the Reverend Father Adams. Chapter nine."

Mrs. Ashby maintained a smile of supercilious amusement during the whole of the reading, and each time a dish was handed to her she said, "Thank you, Sister!" in a loud, resounding whisper. And each time that this occurred, the nun gave an uncontrollable upward glance from her book.

Meantime, the two friends ate everything with a genteel dissatisfaction, while the habituées of the convent accepted what they were given with their eyes persistently lowered and little starts of silent apology. And the suspicious lady gazed openly at the boarder who had been the last to arrive, deriving a secret agitation from each detail of her dress, face, and figure. She remembered that every one had bowed to her, one after the other, as soon as she was seated—and that the recipient of these courtesies had answered them with a surprised and grateful look, rather as if each person was doing her an individual service. It was she alone who had given a little bow and smile to Sister Ursula, and she kept looking at her while she read, as if she were pleased to listen to the life of the Venerable Hubert Gregorovius. She sat back with one hand playing with a piece of bread, not seeming to see anything else that went on about her.

Julian had debated some time whether he would meet Mrs. Benwell that Friday morning, and eventually he

Digitized by Google

decided he would not. He had met her five times within a fortnight, and he knew that such a situation must be treated lightly if either the man or woman is to enjoy it. It is usually the woman's part to provide little surprises and keep alive a faint uncertainty, and he liked, sometimes, to be kept waiting by a woman, because he knew that, had she not given him the pleasure of guessing, he would have become bored.

His friendship with Blanche needed far more delicate handling than an ordinary affair, and though five meetings in a fortnight would be nothing with another woman, with her it was already a good deal. He knew now that he had only to walk to Trafalgar Square and on four mornings a week he would be sure to meet her, and it was therefore clearly he who must provide the surprises, as well as protect them both from her terrible conscience.

On Thursday night he had quite decided not to go—in fact, in order to be sure not to go, he had made an engagement for Friday morning to visit a private collection of pictures with another woman. He was going out a good deal just then, and women were apt to be kind to him; they were rather apt to suggest seeing private collections of pictures with him, and meeting him in the Park.

On Friday morning he was in a particularly good humour with himself, as he passed through the smoking-room on his way to breakfast. He stopped on the way, and rearranged certain objects that the manservant in dusting had slightly disturbed, and in the interest of his room he forgot all about breakfast for several minutes.

His pleasure in his new possessions had not yet abated, and that morning even the dullness of the weather left him calm. That he wanted to meet Blanche after her lesson, and of his own free will was keeping an appointment with another woman, was entirely to his satisfaction; the coffee was perfect, and he opened the weighty pages of *The Times* in that frame of mind that must remain the hedonist's ideal.

Digitized by Google

But a ring and knock resounded that announced a telegram, and tearing it open he learnt that his lady could not keep their appointment that morning; he hardly noticed that she added: "Do come tea to-morrow 5."

His temper instantly became uncertain, and he could not decide whether or not he needed the lamp to read by; in a moment he was quite sure that the English climate and artificial lights were already ruining his eyes. There was nothing to read in the papers in any case, and he returned to the smoking-room, angry that he should be made to choose what he wished to do. For he could not think of anything else that he wanted to do, and during the next hour, with a book of essays in his hand before an excellent fire, he wondered if he should go to meet Blanche. He did not know now whether he wished to see her, for he did not know what he would say to her if he did. What did they talk about when they were together? She did not understand any of the things that interested him. But what interested him? His collection of amulets perhaps; and to show her those would certainly involve a religious discussion with her. His books were another hobby, and she could not tell the difference between a first folio and a modern reprint. His views, his ideas, his observations of life, would all be equally unintelligible to her. But then those were subjects that one rarely discussed with any woman, because as a rule one was making love to her, or at least talking to her about herself. And he could not make love to Blanche; even if he could he did not think he wanted to at eleven o'clock in the morning. Of what would he and Mrs. Bathurst have talked in the intervals of their pictures, at the private collection to which they were to have gone? She posed as an intellectual, and he would have made her feel that her criticisms of the pictures, which she was sure to make with an air of authority, were full of the subtlest merit and penetration, a game which would have amused both her and him. And then they would have talked about her, and if afterwards she thought about the morning it would be either with a glow of

Digitized by Google

pleasure at having been understood, a glow that would be reflected upon him, or else vexation that she had not made him talk instead of letting him listen, a vexation that might change into curiosity to know more about him. In either case she would think about him and wish to see him again. In those women who thought about him at all he was beginning to know the symptoms, and he felt he was again face to face with that enemy that said : Is it worth while ? He was genuine when he wondered why the game had amused him, genuine when he suddenly saw no amusement in it at all. Neither that nor anything else seemed to hold interest for him now.

But the idea of Blanche returned before he was aware of it, with the conviction that his feeling for her was sincere, and he remembered a phrase of Sainte Beuve's, "Est-ce qu'une vie de femme se raconte ? Elle se sent," and knew that the same was true of the feeling a woman inspired. He could not explain why he wished to see her when they had nothing in common, but he recognized that she was mysterious to him, that everything that concerned her seemed mysterious and romantic.

The clock struck half-past eleven, and he could no longer doubt himself; he rose and went quickly into the hall. Before putting on his hat he looked at himself in the oval mirror he had recently bought, and passed his hand over his hair; it was beginning to grow a trifle thin on his forehead, and when he caught sight of the anxiety of his mirrored eyes he could not help smiling. But even as he smiled he looked at himself attentively, and his immaculate appearance made him marvel afresh over the woman he was going out to see. In the hansom life became interesting to him once more, for his mind was occupied with wondering if he were late.

He saw by the clock of St. Martin-in-the-Fields that he was three minutes ahead of the time when her elocution lesson usually broke up. Getting out at the accustomed corner he lit another cigarette, and walked up the street in a leisurely expectancy. As she had never kept him waiting more than ten minutes or so, and as he had no

Digitized by Google

wish to loiter at a street corner like any clerk-lover, he had always gone up the whole length of a certain street and then come back again. He had never yet been obliged to walk the distance twice, but on that morning he reached his original starting-point and no one had appeared.

He was afraid he had missed her, and took the short-cut into the street where stood her teacher's house; he was almost abreast with Number 62 when the door opened. His heart gave a delightful leap, and he crossed over, not to meet her too obviously before her fellow pupils. But when he looked round again he saw, among the four or five women, no sign of that slender figure he was seeking, and when the four or five had parted and gone their separate ways the street was empty. It struck him as likely she had been kept, and it was easy, though not very agreeable, to wait a little longer. But ten minutes went by, and no one came. And by that time he longed exceedingly to see her. He discovered within himself curiosities about her that he longed to satisfy at once, details that he had accepted, gratefully of course, when he was with her, but that he had never till now hungered for in absence from her—the long folds of her skirt, for instance, and the lines of her close-fitting jacket, and the dark fur collar upon which he had seen, in charming contrast to it, some blowing tendrils of her hair. He wanted to hear her speak. He felt as acute, as desperate a disappointment as if he were never going to see her again, as if this had been the last chance. When could he see her again? Could he go that afternoon to the convent? But he felt that he had been cheated, and that even if he went to see her that afternoon it would not make up for the wasted morning. Nothing could make up for the morning they had lost. His watch pointed to half-past twelve, and realizing that he was looking ridiculous he went home.

Blanche had thought perhaps he would come on Friday afternoon, but she hoped he would not; Carfrae was

Digitized by Google

coming that afternoon to hear what she was going to recite at Lady Dickinson's on Monday night, and the two men might meet. If they did. . . . She did not want them to meet; she had not yet told Carfrae that Julian sometimes came to see her, and she thought she would rather tell him before he found it out for himself. Then she thought how nice it would be if they could like each other. She was fond of Carfrae. And she was sure they would like each other because they were both so wonderfully clever.

Carfrae did not come that day. No one came. It was upsetting, for as she was expecting a visitor she could not settle down to anything, and while helping Sister Catherine in the still-room she left the door open so that whenever the convent bell rang she could hear, and go to the end of the passage to see who it was. The bell rang several times, but there was no one for her.

By supper-time her headache was much worse, and on Saturday morning she could scarcely get up for an aching lassitude.

It was her day for reading aloud to the old lady, but she came back earlier than usual as her knees began to tremble under her, and she was afraid of falling seriously ill. While she was going upstairs it occurred to her suddenly that George might have mistaken the day, and she told the porteress that if Mr. Carfrae came she would see him.

"I will not see anyone else—not even Mr. Eames," she said with a great effort. "You know Mr. Eames, don't you?"

"The dark, slim gentleman, Mrs. Benwell?"

To hear Julian described as dark and slim gave her a tightening of the throat, and all her resolutions seemed to weaken.

"Yes," she answered after a pause, "and Mr. Carfrae is the tall gentleman. I shall be busy with him when he comes, and so I cannot see anyone else."

She sat in her room with her book of recitations in her hand, but she did not feel able to open it. She knew the

Digitized by Google

verses by heart, and with her there was not much business of perfecting expression and gestures. She only spoke her lines, and when she was told that actresses often spent hours in front of the glass practising one note, one line, or a hundred interpretations, she was frightened. She did not feel she was clever enough to do that, and she was frightened at her audacity in competing with actresses who did. Then George had comforted her by saying that to speak lines was enough, and to be sure people seemed pleased. She had had in all six engagements to recite in private houses, and each time everyone had been most kind. She had received compliments—even congratulations.

When at last she tried to read over the pieces that she had chosen for Monday night she could not fix her attention on them; she felt bewildered. Her thoughts blurred together and had all the oddness and inconsequence of dreams. She drowsed in her chair, and though she felt cold she did not have the courage to get up and fetch a shawl. Only since she had come in had this shivering begun. If only all this would go by to-morrow, when she was to spend a day in the country with Mary!

There came a knock at the door, and a voice—not the porteress's—told that she was wanted in the parlour. She opened the door and saw a French lay-sister who sometimes answered the front-door when the porteress was busy.

"There's a gentleman to see you, Mrs. Benwell."

"Was it the porteress who let him in?"

"Oh! the porteress was called away and I am in charge for the rest of the afternoon."

"But did she not give you a message from me before she went?"

"No, she didn't say anything. I expect she was in too much of a hurry."

Blanche did not linger a moment before going downstairs, and before she reached the parlour she had a dozen times in anticipation already opened the door. When she

Digitized by Google

did so she saw a man standing looking towards the door. It was Julian.

Something in her appearance gave him a shock, but he could not exactly define it; he did not know if it were because she was pale, or because her face seemed a little different to him, but as she came towards him, and when she did not speak, he rushed upon the verge of saying irrevocable things. He had come anxious to see her, but not in any way prepared to be profoundly stirred at the sight of her, and it seemed to him then that they were so disturbed at the sight of each other because they had passed into the presence of an emotion beyond their control.

He wanted to take her hand again, and then he dared not, but as they were still standing he came a step nearer.

"Why didn't you go to your lesson yesterday? I waited for you. Were you ill?"

"No," answered Blanche.

She was trying to tell him that he could not stay, but her spirit failed her.

He thought that she had been afraid of herself in meeting him, and therefore had avoided him. That they were afraid of each other sent excitement to his brain.

"Then," he insisted, "why didn't you come?"

As usual, as he had always done in his life, he approached love recklessly, without foreseeing the consequences. The reasons why he had decided an idyllic friendship with her was all that could be possible vanished from his mind, and he knew nothing in the world but the desire to step with her into more glowing, more exquisite realities.

"Will you not sit down?" she said to him, and she herself sat down upon one of the high-backed chairs by the table, locking her hands together in her lap. She did not seem to notice that he remained standing.

"It was a class-day yesterday," she said, "and it was not so necessary for me to go. It is the private lessons that are important for me."

Digitized by Google

He looked at her, but now had nothing to say. She had become incomprehensible to him.

"I am so sorry you waited for me. You must have thought me very rude. I was not absolutely sure you were going to be there on Friday. I hope it did not put you out."

The fact that he was there when she ought not to see him so troubled her that she felt something give way in her head. She had not been feeling well before, and now she could scarcely see, she could scarcely think. . . .

He saw her put her hand vaguely, blindly to her forehead.

"But you are ill!"

"I have a headache," she answered, looking vaguely about her, "but it will go."

"What are you doing for it? Have you had it long? You don't know how to take care of yourself——"

He moved irresolutely towards her, and in another moment he would have had to take her in his arms.

"I am very dull to-day, I am so sorry." She got up. She saw a little light ahead of her, and fixing her eyes upon him she tried to see it more clearly. It was in her brain; it was showing her what she must do.

"Perhaps you had better go. Yes, I think perhaps you had better go. I am so dull to-day. I am afraid I am very stupid."

The front-door had just shut; they heard the echo of it resounding through the hall, but it could hardly have been that for which they were waiting. Yet Julian was conscious of waiting for something he knew was about to happen.

Then the door of the parlour was opened and the lay-sister ushered in Carfrae.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER X

THERE was probably little that Carfrae less expected to find than Julian Eames with Blanche, yet he betrayed nothing of his surprise. But when Blanche saw him she gave an exclamation.

"George! Is it you?"

"You expected me, didn't you?" he asked, as he shook hands with her.

"Yes," she answered, not knowing what she was saying. "I thought you would come."

The blood rushed into Julian's face.

"I think I had better go now, hadn't I, Mrs. Benwell?" he said, sharply, but Carfrae, because he knew it would make him angry, immediately demurred.

"Don't go yet, Eames; I have only just arrived!" And Blanche repeated after him; "Please, don't go!"

In his bitter revulsion of feeling Julian saw every reason to be angry, seeing her instantly as a scheming woman, one who could play one man off against another, and manœuvre to get one man out of the house before the other arrived. It was because he would not fall in with such scheming that he remained.

"Mrs. Benwell had the kindness to promise me once that she would recite to me—those recitations, I believe, that she is going to give at Lady Dickenson's on Monday."

Carfrae's eyes seemed to say to Blanche: "Did you really promise that?" and when he met her eyes he was surprised into a pause.

"That is very lucky," he answered, bringing forward a chair, "for I wanted to hear them myself. Have I your permission to stay? May we both hear them?"

Digitized by Google

Then he saw that something was the matter, and, forgetting Julian, he exclaimed, as Julian had done:

"But, Blanche, I think you are ill!"

"I have a headache, but it will be all right."

"All the same, you must do something for it. You must not tire yourself."

She did not answer immediately.

"Shall I recite now?" she asked, after a moment, looking up at him. Anything he told her to do she would have done.

"But aren't you too tired?"

"No."

She stood looking at him. She had not forgotten Julian, but she could not see him distinctly, and she seemed lost in the sea of a nameless and submerging trouble. Morally she clung to George, without knowing why she did; not conscious of him exactly—conscious only of something that was going to guide her.

"I will recite now," she repeated. Without even leaning upon a chair, in the middle of the room, she put her hands together and faced the two men.

But for a few moments she could not find her voice, and for a few moments they would not have heard her if she had. Carfrae had never in his life felt a presence so strongly—it was so strongly there seemed a sinister quality in the degree of it—as Julian Eames's in this room. At one moment it seemed insufferable that Julian Eames should hear her recite; then on the other hand he felt it might be easier for her to recite than for them all three to sit and try in vain to talk to each other. It would soon be over; and, clasping his knee, he looked down at his swinging foot as if to prevent himself from seeing that conventionally good figure opposite, that handsome and half-sadly meditative face. . . .

As for Julian, he wanted—he felt that with all his soul he wanted—to go, but he could not. The tenderness and passion she had inspired in him were shattered, and his anger seemed invulnerable at every point. But though he felt so bitterly inimical to both her and Carfrae he

Digitized by Google

could not bring himself to leave her. He saw, above her head, a white plaster statue of Our Lady on a bracket over the door, and on the wall a representation of the Sacred Heart between two prints—one of Ignatius Loyola, and one of St. Thomas Aquinas. The row of chairs against the other wall was unbroken, and her dress flowed down upon a beeswaxed floor. To have that picture before him; to see her standing there, and to be about to hear her recite. . . . He had to stay, even if, having heard her, he never came back.

And, each with his own reason, the two men sat stiff and silent, apparently merely waiting for her to begin.

It was several moments before she did. She looked at her hands, which Julian had said were the hands of a contemplative, and interlaced her fingers. But she dropped her hands almost instantly, and as she raised her eyes she said:

"The Lake-Isle of Innisfree."

Her selections were so perfect! But he would not yield to her spell—only he could not save himself from remembering the first time he had heard her, when he had thought her voice the most touching he had ever known, and he had wondered what sort of a woman she could be. If he had let himself yield to her spell, the words, as he listened, would have seemed to slip away like the flowing of some rare liquid, leaving behind it a silver trail. Her voice would have left a trail of sadness and regret through his thoughts—a regret that he treasured, a sadness that was pure enchantment.

Her voice could not but have it's effect, and Carfrae, losing himself a little, remembered a phrase in his play in which he had compared her entrance to the rising of the moon over a dark landscape. He weighed the words again, and mingling with his appreciation of her was a doubt as to whether anything could ever describe her. Could he ever imprison her in words? In his play he must catch still more of her—give her an opportunity for just this. Ideas for his third act moved shadow-like across his mind.

The music ebbed, and as she lingered upon the last line

Digitized by Google

they thought of the silence that would fall, and both men wondered how much she had understood, while each in his own way doubted if she could ever understand that which she conveyed to them, and if she had not achieved her magic only by the way she said: "And evening full of the linnet's wings."

When she had finished she looked at Carfrae.

"It is very good," he said. "You can be quite satisfied. It was beautiful—I have nothing to suggest."

But she continued to stand in front of them. Her fever had risen while she recited, and in a sick confusion she had terrifying thoughts. Yet she knew it was a terror from which Julian could save her if he wished; if she could hear him speak it would bring her back from the grey distance into which she was receding; and her eyes passed from Carfrae to him and gazed at him.

"You are doing so much better," said Carfrae suddenly, with what seemed to her a jarring and uneven emphasis. "Those lessons have helped you wonderfully. Your voice is much better placed—so much stronger."

"Shall I say one of the other pieces?" she asked.

"Can you? You are not too tired?"

She shook her head, and began at once, without a pause.

"'My Ships,'" she said.

"'If all the ships I have at sea
Should come a-sailing home to me—
Ah well! the harbour could not hold
That fleet so brave, so gay, and bold;
Too many sails I think there'd be
If all my ships came home to me.'"

She took a step forward.

"'If half the ships I have at sea
Should come a-sailing home to me—
Ah well! I should have wealth as great
As any King that lived in state,
So rich the treasures there would be,
In half my ships now out at sea!'"

Digitized by Google

She paused, and Carfrae knew how startled he had been; for the quality of her voice had changed, and through it came a distant sobbing, lonely and haunting as an echo in the evening. He was profoundly startled. Was something rising to the surface of her life that he had never foreseen? And when her voice began again he looked away as if he winced that she should reveal it.

" ' If just one ship I have at sea
Should come a-sailing home to me,
Ah well! the tempest clouds might frown
And all the others then go down—
Still rich—and proud—and glad—I'd be
If that one ship came home to me!' "

At the end of the verse there was again a second's hush, and Julian got up and walked over to the window. . . . And now she felt that Julian was no longer listening, and that she was crying to him from a great distance to turn and look at her.

" ' If that one ship went down at sea
And all the others came to me,
Weighed down with wealth and gems untold,
With riches, honour, glory, gold—
The poorest soul on earth I'd be
If that one ship went down at sea!' "

. . . Carfrae had never dreamed that she could say as she did—" *If that one ship went down at sea.*"

" George!"

She was leaning her weight on the table, and then he took her hands, but she looked towards Julian.

" You are ill—and now we will go away and not disturb you any more. Whom can I see to put you in charge of?"

She did not look at him, only at Julian. Julian turned around at last.

" I think Mrs. Benwell must have fever," said Carfrae, towering; " I believe that what she needs is to rest for at least two or three days."

" I can't. I can't do that. I am going to see Mary to-morrow—my little niece—in the country."

Digitized by Google

"You'll have to give that up," answered Carfrae.

He, too, looked towards Julian; they were both looking at him, and while everything in the room seemed to be listening Julian came forward, putting out his hand in order to take leave.

"I think I had better be the one not to disturb you any longer, Mrs. Benwell, as Mr. Carfrae so considerately suggests. You are not in a condition to see so many people. And I am most distressed—most concerned that you should be feeling so unwell! Yet your recitations were quite perfect," he said; and though his breath came a little short he went on, with the same deliberation, the same implacable formality: "Let me entreat you not to wear out your strength!"

He paused again, shook hands with Carfrae, and left, all in an unbroken silence. There was silence while they listened to his steps in the hall, but when the front-door had shut, distant and muffled, Carfrae asked, with a curious flatness of restraint:

"Does he come often to see you?"

"No, not often. He has come only a few times."

She had sunk back into her chair.

He could not torment her with questions, and yet the fear that she was in love with Julian Eames was intolerable. Then he told himself that her illness might be an explanation for all that had amazed him in her.

"Blanche, listen to me. You must go to bed now, and I will tell one of the sisters to look after you. And you must promise not to go out of town to-morrow. Can't you go another day?"

"George, I must go to-morrow. You don't understand. It is the only day in the term when they can receive visitors. I have looked forward to it for weeks, and how could I bear to disappoint Mary?"

His human interest in her, his love for her, was always shot with the egotism, or, in another way, the aloofness, of the writer, and it was impossible for him to forget his play for long at a time. And just then he could not help

Digitized by Google

thinking that in the play she must speak the name *Mary*, for as she pronounced it it seemed the most harmonious he had ever heard. . . .

She was resting her arm on the table and her brow on her hand, and she hardly knew what had happened, she hardly knew what he was saying; for the trouble closed over her head, and, fighting its terrors, she felt that she must weep.

"Where is Mary's convent?"

"It is at Ashington—three-quarters of an hour away from Charing Cross. I must take the nine o'clock train, and I will come back in the evening."

"Do the trains run often to and from Ashington?"

"I think so—I really don't know."

"Because perhaps I could go and get Mary and bring her here, and perhaps as a great exception, because you are ill, they would let her stay with you to-morrow night, and then I would take her back on Monday."

After a long pause she said: "You are so good. You always help me—I always feel as though you were helping me."

She did not realize what he was doing for her, but that he was there comforted her. For a moment she had an idea it was Father Dudley who was standing a little behind her chair.

He went to the door and spoke to the lay-sister, who was sitting with some knitting in the hall. In a little while Sister Catherine appeared, and after a few words had passed between her and Carfrae she went swiftly across the room to Blanche's side; when she bent over her, her veil, which had floated behind her as she moved, fell upon Blanche's shoulders and half-encircled her in its folds.

She led her upstairs, while Carfrae waited below, and when she had put Blanche to bed she went to the office to get permission to write to the Mother Superior of Mary's Convent.

Carfrae was kept waiting for over half an hour, and during most of the time he stood, or walked up and down

Digitized by Google

the room, while it grew dark. He heard beyond the door the faint bustle of the evening hour in the convent, the passage of quick feet across the stone floors, the sound of lowered voices, the shutting of a door. At one moment he guessed the boarders were going in to supper, for he knew the routine of the place. The door must have shut upon them. Then, by a few words he overheard, he knew that one of the nuns, or perhaps a lay-sister, was doing the usual round of lighting the gas, but the lamp in the hall was evidently refractory for a time, and there was a whispered conversation.

Then Sister Catherine came in again, and exclaimed at finding him in the dark.

"I assure you it is all right. I enjoyed the dark, for it was such a rest to the eyes."

The deep and shining wells of her eyes astonished him with their beauty. She had led him into the vestibule, where he could see the clear, pale oval of her face under the white forehead-band, and those shining eyes.

"Here is the letter, Mr. Carfrae, and I am sure there will be no trouble about bringing the little girl back with you. The address is on the envelope, so you cannot make a mistake."

"And you will take good care of Mrs. Benwell, Sister, won't you?"

At first he had hesitated to call her "Sister," for he had never talked to a nun before, and he thought it would be a difficult word to say. But suddenly he found it extraordinarily sweet.

"Sister . . . should she be ill, you will call for a doctor, won't you?"

"Do not be anxious, for we will do everything for her. And it is nothing—she will be well by Monday."

"Then good-night, Sister. I shall be back to-morrow."

When Sister Catherine went up to her she thought Blanche was asleep, but, coming nearer, she saw that, though the eyes were closed, tears were forcing themselves under the pale eyelids and falling upon the pillow. The

Digitized by Google

nun knelt by the bedside, and gathering one of Blanche's hands between her own she began saying the Prayer of St. Aloysius in a low voice, her lips moving but slightly, her habit shadowy in the candle-light.

After a time the tears ceased, and gradually the low voice trailed into a murmur. She waited till she was sure Blanche was asleep, and then she rose to go, laying the imprisoned hand gently on the counterpane. She lit a night-light which she placed upon the floor, after which she noiselessly left the room. The bell for Evening Office was just about to ring.

Blanche was dozing, but her sleep was restless and haunted by dreams. The events of the afternoon took monstrous shapes that loomed over her bed, and she was further aware of an enormous mouth that approached her from a distance, coming faster and faster, and finally rushing upon her with a roar. It seemed, too, at times, as though something were required of her, and once she started up in bed, ready to jump out of it because she knew someone was calling. She waited, but she did not know what to do, and, forgetting again that she had meant to do anything at all she sank back upon her pillow. But she kept thinking that Julian was outside the door, and that Father Dudley was talking to him, and in imagination she got up again and opened the door, saying: "Father, it was not my fault. I beseech you to give me Absolution!"

Outside the door was the French lay-sister who had been in charge that afternoon during the porteress's absence. She carried a large basket on her arm, and she laughed and said: "Guess what is in this basket!" Then again a voice called from far away, and the lay-sister cried, "The curtain is up! That's my entrance!" and ran back along the passage.

She opened her eyes, and saw she was in bed, and saw the circular reflection of the night-light upon the ceiling. She remembered that Julian had been kind to her; she had said: "I always feel as if you are helping me!" But then she remembered it was Carfrae who was bringing

Digitized by Google

Mary to see her, and the tears began to flow down her face. All her fears returned, and she thought Father Dudley was going to refuse her Absolution. She explained to him it was not her fault, but in the midst of her confession Julian came into the room, leading Mary by the hand.

And then, little by little, her mind exhausted itself; a feeling of benumbment crept over her; she tried to raise her hand and could not, and wondering why she could not raise it she fell into a heavy sleep.

In the morning her fever had left her, and though she felt very weak she was able to get up in time for ten o'clock Mass. After Mass she sat down in the hall, waiting for Carfrae and Mary to arrive. At the idea of seeing the child she was excited, and yet a profound sadness lingered with her. She tried not to think of the day before, for when she did the sadness increased a hundredfold, almost to a sensation of disaster.

Carfrae and Mary arrived a little before half-past eleven, and as soon as she saw her aunt the child gave a shriek of joy. Blanche stooped and held out her arms, and Mary threw herself into them.

Carfrae had expected a fair-haired, quiet little girl, rather like Blanche, with eyes like hers, but Mary was full of vitality and quick as a drop of mercury. She was eight years old, rather small for her age, and very thin and agile; her face was squarely shaped, and her mouth was large and already expressive of character. At present she was bubbling over with news to tell Blanche, and pulled at her sleeve, complaining that she did not listen. They had all three gone into the parlour, and Blanche had sat down, drawing the little girl towards her. She took off the little hat and coat, touching the child's hair with her fingers, smoothing her cheek, and then taking the small, resolute face in her hands and gazing into it. It was true that she barely heard what Mary was telling her, and yet Carfrae, watching, saw what the child meant to her, how instinctively her arms went out to close about the child.

Digitized by Google

Blanche was looking very fragile that morning. Her movements were languid, and he devined that she would have liked to hold the little thing quietly, with the little head on her breast, and dream over it. The day before, though he was unwilling that it should be so, she had seemed to give him a revelation of something he had not known in her before. Do what he liked, the memory of her last piece remained with him in the light of a tardy revelation. And now, watching her face, he was not sure that within her dream there was not an unusual degree of mother-passion, and he was again startled by the thought that there might be forces within her of which up to the day before he had been entirely unaware.

Mary had slipped away from Blanche's hold and run to get the bag which they had brought with them, and which contained her things for the night. She could not get out fast enough that they had come in the train in a first-class carriage, and had driven from Charing Cross in a hansom, and she pulled all the effects out of the bag, to assure Ba-ba she had forgotten nothing, and that she had brought a dressing-gown and slippers.

"And what did we talk about in the train?" asked Carfrae, smiling down at her; and, dropping everything on the floor, she rushed up to him, seizing his hand as she repeated some words that Blanche could not understand.

"Mary! You are making so much noise that Mother will get out of bed and come all the way downstairs to scold you!" But her hands made that instinctive movement forward, as though she wanted to take the child back to herself again.

"Hush!" said Carfrae. "We did not only talk in the train, we recited poetry; and this is what we recited." He restrained her with his hand, and for a moment she stood quite still, looking up at him: "'In Xanadu did Khubla Khan——'"

But she jumped up and down once more, repeating in a sort of elfin ecstacy:

"'In Xanadu—in Xanadu—in Xanadu——'" Then:

Digitized by Google

" And what about the river ? Please tell Ba-ba about the river !"

" ' Where Alph the sacred river ran——' "

She listened, with an attention and intelligence in her face he had already found remarkable.

He had taken a great fancy to her, but he could not fail to see she was a child that Blanche could not easily deal with, and it would have been better had she been the little quiet, fair-haired thing he had expected, who would have nestled in Blanche's arms and let herself be dreamed over. Yet this child was affectionate enough—indeed, tempestuously affectionate—and had returned toBlanche's side to fondle her, throwing her arms round her neck and kissing her.

" How can I thank you !" said Blanche, looking up at last, but with the little girl pressed close against her. " You have done almost too much for me."

" When I saw you feeling so ill, how could I let you run the risk of falling ill altogether ? It would have been madness for you to have taken the journey to-day."

Unconsciously she sighed, and hid her face against Mary's hair. Julian had gone as if they were total strangers to each other—almost, she felt gropingly, as if she had made him angry. What had she done ? George had remained behind, and had made this sacrifice for her—for it was, indeed, a sacrifice. And that George should have been anxious because she was feeling ill, and that Julian should not have cared, was like a sore and aching spot in her heart which she dared not touch upon.

But looking round her, the room, the disposition of the chairs, and the very pictures, seemed to press upon her heart and make it ache again. She flinched from the sight of the room. It was there that Julian had sat, listening to her recite. He had sat sideways in his chair, one arm passed around the back of it, his hands clasped, one knee crossed over the other. The fact that he would not speak had seemed to increase her bewilderment, her sickness and trembling. And she flinched from the recollection of a great pain that had stabbed her heart when

Digitized by Google

he had got up and gone to the window, and she had felt that her voice was a cry to him she knew he would not hear.

She responded to Mary's caresses, holding her close.

"Mary, Mary!" she said, trying to look into her face.

The child was quiet for a whole long minute, and Carfrae felt that this picture they made, clasping each other, belonged to herself, and not to Helena. He stood thinking.

The door creaked as it opened, and Blanche looked up. "Who is that?" she said, smiling, to Mary; and when the little girl caught sight of Sister Catherine on the threshold, she bounded impetuously into the nun's arms.

Sister Catherine made the sign of the cross upon her forehead before she kissed her, and then she listened with an expression of joyous benignity to the little girl's immediate chatter.

"Ah!" she said, "but we must not tire Ba-ba too much, for she is not very well to-day, and I see she is looking rather pale. These spirits would tire a giant!" She smiled a greeting at Carfrae. "You see, we have taken care of the invalid, Mr. Carfrae, but now we must let her rest again. Come, my bird," she said to Mary, "and we will see what Sister has got this time to show you!"

"May I have a little talk with Mrs. Benwell, Sister? Five minutes, if I don't tire her?"

"Even ten minutes you might have, and then she must rest, for we want her well by to-morrow."

Mary released her hand from the nun's, and came back to give Blanche another kiss.

"I will not be long," she whispered, and then she danced off, and after the door had shut her treble voice was still audible, talking to Sister Catherine.

Carfrae took a chair near Blanche's.

"I am afraid you are still feeling very weak," he said. "I am sure it was some imprudence that made you so run-down and feverish. What are you going to have for lunch?"

Digitized by Google

She tried to laugh.

"How should I know, George? But Sister Florida was told to look after my lunch, and I am sure it will be very nice. And I am to have it earlier to-day—at half-past twelve. They are all so wonderfully kind to me."

"We must have you strong by to-morrow night," he said.

"Yes, yes; I shall be all right."

He thought it would be cruel to speak to her of Julian, and he was on the point of asking her about her recitations, when, raising her eyes, she said:

"You were surprised to see Mr. Eames here yesterday."

"I didn't know you had done more than just meet him at Armathwaite's."

"I meant to tell you——".

"You are always too ready to blame yourself. Why should you tell me? I am not your mentor."

"I have told Father Dudley," she answered rather quickly.

That she should explain herself aroused the fear and surprise that had been born in him about her the day before.

"I am sure there is no harm in his coming to see you," he said.

She wanted to tell him that Father Dudley had advised her not to see Julian for a fortnight, and that he had been let in by a mistake, but in her bodily weakness she shrank from the effort of a long story, and was silent, knitting her brows.

"You don't like him," she said suddenly, without thinking out beforehand what she was going to say.

"I hardly know him, so really I am no judge."

"What you know of him you don't like?"

"No; I am afraid I don't."

She sat very still, and asked: "Why?"

"I didn't know at first why I did not like him. It was instinctive. But later two remarks I heard him make sufficiently explained that instinct of mine."

She flinched from the thought that he might speak of

Digitized by Google

yesterday; she wished he did not know that Julian could say good-bye to her as coldly as he had.

"I once heard him make light of religion, rather wittily, to amuse a smoking-room, and I heard him speak of a woman who had been dining in the same house as the rest of us in a way a man should not do."

He saw that contraction of her brow that he knew meant a struggling comprehension, and then she said, with more vehemence than he had ever heard her use:

"I know that he has lost his faith, but that is not his fault. Grace is not given to everyone. You cannot blame him if it is denied to him."

"I am not a Roman Catholic, and therefore for a man not to be a fervent Roman Catholic does not impress me as a very terrible matter. But for myself, I insist on reverence in public, whatever a man's religion may be, and I thought that Eames was irreverent to the point of bad form."

"You must have made a mistake, George. It cannot be true. It was somebody else, or else you did not hear right."

"But I cannot think I have made a mistake."

"It must have been. If you think well, you will see it must have been."

He exclaimed: "How can I contradict you when you are looking so white! Perhaps it was a mistake." Born of the fear of her vehemence was a desire to get away before he could be sure of what he had seen. "I must go. Your lunch will be ready, or ought to be, in five minutes."

He waited, expecting her to answer, but she did not even ask him to stay. She went with him to the door, and there she put her hand on his arm. Evidently she was making a great effort to appear natural and unconcerned.

"I cannot thank you enough for bringing Mary to me! It was so good of you."

"I can really say it was a pleasure," he said formally, not thinking of Mary. "She is an interesting child. But I can't leave you all the afternoon with her, and I'll come

Digitized by Google

back at half-past three and take her out. Do you think that will amuse her ?"

" How can I thank you ?" she said again, tears coming to her eyelids.

When he had left her she clasped her hands together in a sort of agony. As soon as George told her that Julian had blasphemed, she remembered with terror the day he had spoken against the Church even to her. It was a conversation she had forgotten, and when she was reminded of it she tried not to remember. In her terror that it was true her lips insisted that it could not be. And yet she had always known that he had lost his faith, and so was it not natural that, unfortified by prayer, he had been tempted to speak lightly and irreverently of things which in his heart of hearts he knew to be sacred ? For she still believed that in his heart of hearts he was grieved at his own lack of faith. Had he not expressed regret when he told her he had lost his faith ? It was that regret that had started a hope in her heart, and now the desire to bring him back to God rose in her like a flood; it was so great that there was a rushing of blood in her ears. She wanted to throw herself on her knees and pray, and yet she did not move, and stood with her fingers pressed against her eyes.

Prayer was needed to turn God from His righteous anger. She saw Julian menaced by a heavenly vengeance, and with horror she thought that he might die in his unbelief. She felt that with her prayers she might help him, but her whole life would hardly be enough if God were to be dissuaded from His anger. In a moment of exaltation she knew that she could give up her whole life if she felt that God would accept it as a sacrifice. Her sadness at the chill of his good-bye altogether disappeared, and even her faintness left her; she was inspired with sudden strength, and for a moment she seemed to walk upon air, no longer conscious of her body. It was as though her sacrifice had been accepted.

The day developed like a maze of new sensations, but she was guided by her sense of the nearness of God, and

Digitized by Google

of His infinite mercy. Everything she saw conveyed an inner meaning to her heart. The striking of a clock reminded her of the passing of the hours and the significance of Eternity. The rattling of a carriage down the square sounded hollow as the indifference of men to God—an indifference which can be atoned for only by the prayers of those who believe, and especially by those men and women dedicated to the religious life. Mary's presence was the comfort which God had provided for her; as she hung over the child she was filled with the realization of her blessings. That she should be allowed to intercede for Julian was an inestimable gift, and to be able to taste some of the joys of motherhood, although she was childless, and that on that day of all days Mary should be with her, was but another proof of God's goodness to her.

Mary had returned full of suppressed excitement, for Sister Catherine had permitted her to mark with a cross and a star all the little cakes that Sister Philippa, in the kitchen, had laid on a wooden board ready for baking.

"And Sister has been telling me secrets!" she cried. "Shall I tell them to Ba-ba, Sister?" but Sister Catherine put her finger on her lip.

"You must keep all secrets locked up tight in a little dark room there," she said, and she touched Mary's forehead with her hand. "For as soon as you open the door to them they grow wings—and then they fly far, far away, and you never get them back."

"Then I cannot tell them to you, Ba-ba, but I will tell you other secrets of my own."

As a special favour Mary was permitted to have her lunch with Blanche in the parlour, and as Blanche, who could not eat, watched her and listened to her, she was always conscious of this new-born life of the heart that was stirring within herself.

Stories illustrating the efficacy of prayer offered themselves to her memory and were passionately embraced, for she knew she could not convert Julian by her words. Father Dudley had said that it was dangerous for a woman to argue on such subjects with a man, and she felt he was

Digitized by Google

right. Julian was so clever and she was so stupid. How could she hope to be his match in a discussion? But in spirit, ah! there she was the stronger!

If he had blasphemed it was his misfortune, and with her horror that he should have done so was a pity for him so great it seemed boundless. At the thought of his blindness she had the same yearning she would have, she thought, if she saw Mary wounded and hurt at her feet. During almost the whole of the day she was lifted above the earth by the height of her devotion.

Mary came home worn out with the agitated pleasures of the day, and after a supper of bread and milk Blanche put her to bed. She was giving the child her own bed, and she herself was to sleep on a sofa that had been brought for that night into her room; it was so narrow that she had been afraid Mary would roll out were she to sleep in it.

Blanche's hands trembled as she undressed the little girl, thinking how rarely it was that she was able to do so. It was only on such occasions as these, or during her brief visits to the convent school at Ashington, that she could taste the real experiences of motherhood, and as she felt the relaxed and tired little body leaning against her she was awed, as by a miracle she could not understand.

Before the lamp on her altar she and Mary both knelt, while she guided the sleepy child through her prayers, and when finally she led her to the bed the enveloping tenderness of her feeling for the child went blindly out towards that side of Julian's nature that had mocked at his religion and also grieved and wounded her.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XI

CECIL arrived in town on Monday afternoon, and in the evening sent his carriage to take Blanche to the Dickensons' house. He had returned quite determined to assert his claim upon Blanche and to make it clear, especially to Julian, that the claim was based upon a tacit understanding. For it seemed some sort of an understanding to him, and the thought of her religious scruples, and the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards divorce, never entered his mind. He felt that everything depended upon himself, and he placed his carriage at her disposal, which he had never done before, in order to show her all that he was now willing to do. He felt sure that she had already begun to realize his intentions, so the carriage would simply turn conjecture into certainty.

The room he entered was typical of that period and of that conservative class of society; the furniture was large and unwieldy, the low, very deep armchairs and the ottomans covered with a pale flowered chintz; lampshades and cushions were extravagantly furbelowed, and the walls set out in designs of small, light, water-colour drawings. Under one of the extravagant yellow lampshades a girl was standing, dressed in stiff white satin, with no other colour about her but her long, natural-suède gloves and her chestnut hair. She smiled when she saw Cecil in the distance, and, recognizing Cintra Ellison, he threaded his way towards her.

Until he reached her side she continued to talk to Charles Lovett, who was standing with her, but she seemed also pleased to see Cecil. After he had interrupted her conversation with Lovett they stood talking, while she slowly stirred the air with her large white ostrich-feather fan and appreciated what he said to her.

Digitized by Google

She had a way of following everything that was said to her with her eyes, her face slightly raised, and a faint, just perceptible palpitation of her lids further emphasizing the closeness of her attention.

Cecil found her charming.

Meanwhile Charles Lovett had moved away, and was not even listening.

During the month and a half that he and Cintra had known each other they had achieved what seemed to be friendship, and it came to Cintra, who had hitherto known only love-affairs or friendlessness, as something delightful and yet quite natural, a relationship as fresh and simple as a sunny morning. It had very little of the heat of a love-affair in it, and she was quite content that he should move away and leave her alone with Cecil Armathwaite. But while she seemed all attention to Cecil, she knew that she tolerated him only because he was very rich and much sought after, and she knew that she had been sorry in the beginning that Lovett was an obscure young man. Yet this obscurity seemed to matter less to her than it had once, and when the music commenced she placed her chair at such an angle that she could see Lovett as he stood a little distance away.

The music tended to make her thoughts more dramatic, and she saw how different she was to what she had been. It was only in the last two or three years that these distinctions had shaped themselves within her outlook. At eighteen she would not have tolerated a moment of Cecil Armathwaite's conversation, however rich he had been. . . . Was it that one inevitably got hard, or that one gained experience? But little by little it had begun to chafe to be poor, and obscure, and to be taken out by richer friends, and to have to make an effort to be personally recognized. And gradually she had become aware of a change within herself, and she saw that the things she had once thought beautiful and interesting had withered, and she had grown impatient of them.

For a long time now she had desired the moment when she would tell Lovett more about herself; sometimes

Digitized by Google

when she was with him the desire to set aside reserves and show him her whole life was so great that she could think of nothing else. She had never yielded, not because of any doubt of him, but because the moment had never seemed the perfect one for her. She could not reveal herself as though it were an ordinary story she was telling. The moment had never come that was great enough for such a confidence.

When the music was over he came back to her side.

"I left you alone with Armathwaite because you seemed so captivated by his languid charms. Didn't you want to be left?"

"Now I suppose you are going to say something disagreeable about Cecil Armathwaite. I have felt it coming. What is it?"

"I wonder if I can guess what he talked about."

"Would you have guessed right if I told you he had given me his father's views upon the education of children?"

"No; for I could as soon imagine him doing that as singing the *Magnificat* during a Sunday afternoon call."

"Oh!" she cried, "there is Blanche!"

Later on in the evening she caught sight of Mrs. Benwell standing in a corner of the room with Cecil beside her, and that came as a surprise. What had a man like Cecil Armathwaite to do with Blanche? Up to a little time ago she had not considered it possible that Blanche could have anything to do with men at all, but now she supposed that with her beauty it was impossible that they should not be attracted to her. Yet it seemed to her it would be like falling in love with a nun. But because of this quality in Blanche she was far more interested in her now than she had ever been. She was more interested, and yet she did not go to see Blanche as often as before.

"How pale Mrs. Benwell is!" she said to Lovett. "And then, do you see . . . she does not speak to anyone, and yet she is never rude, and people are simply a little afraid of her."

"To me she is like a woman in a trance."

Digitized by Google

"She must have talent, or her recitations would not move one so. I wonder if she will be a good actress. She is going on the stage, you know."

"There are some things that she could do better than anyone else, but there are only a few things. There is a great deal she could not do nearly as well as almost anyone else. Perhaps she does what she does do on the merits of her face and her voice, but I think it is also because of something touching in herself."

"It must be strange, after a life spent in convents, to find herself here. She looks as if she found it strange."

"Why are you so interested in her? You have never taken your eyes off her."

She did not reply because, from the little vantage of the alcove where they were sitting, she was watching so intently. Someone was being introduced to Mrs. Benwell, but the only men that she knew in the little group were Mr. Carfrae and Mr. Armathwaite. So she glanced round at Lovett with a graceful turn of the head, and once more leaned back in her chair.

"I am interested in everybody, even in you at this moment. And you never tell me anything about yourself."

It was quite true that she would have liked to make him confide in her. She wanted to know what sort of women he had been in love with, and because she was a woman who wished to be first with everyone, she had sometimes wanted to be more to him, in all that she represented and suggested, than any other woman he had known. And just then, because she did not know what his experience had been and was not sure if he would tell her, she had never found him so attractive.

He merely smiled back in answer, and in a few moments she was struck, characteristically, by quite a different idea.

"It is as if with the two people that are in everyone," she said suddenly, "the one learnt through the emotions of the other, and it is through emotions and experiences that we discover the unknown country of our own selves."

Digitized by Google

"But to think along those lines might be fatal! One would become a mere culture-tube in which the bacteria of emotion could propagate undisturbed."

"You are very practical," she answered; and as she looked at him she longed to tell him about Julian.

It was the presence of Blanche that brought her to the very point of telling Lovett. Until she had seen Julian speak so eagerly to another woman it had never occurred to her to be disloyal to him. All her thoughts became incoherent as she tried to decide what she could say, and it was not so much that Lovett was drawing the confidence from her as that certain things within her so longed to find expression. She did not know why it was, but it seemed of extreme importance that someone should be told how she and Julian had walked up and down a certain avenue of trees beside a lake, in melancholy, autumn evenings, and how the four grey columns of a little chapel at the end had glimmered after dusk. She seemed to remember that chapel only at dusk, with the bats rising and falling above the water; and she remembered how the group of giant trees that leaned over the lake-wall seemed to walk away from each other as one came up to them....

It was an innate tendency to be dramatic that tempted her, but in another moment betraying Julian's secret had become a thousand times impossible. If she told Lovett about him at all, she would surely be led to tell the reason why they had not married, and Julian's secret had always been sacred to her. The day he told her that he had eloped, a year before, with a married woman he had known in Russia, and was forced to consider himself bound to her still, held the profoundest emotion of her life, and the thought that she had come near speaking of it brought her a hot recoil. And it placed all that burning time between her and Lovett like an enormous distance, and had Lovett put forward any claim just then the distance would have been widened by the sense that no feeling he was capable of inspiring would ever be worthy of that standard of emotion she had made of her love for Julian.

Digitized by Google

It was strange to be sitting in this sort of intimacy with another man, thinking of that time, and she wondered what remained in her of the girl who had gone to meet Julian that last morning. But there had been more of her present self in that last meeting than in any of their previous meetings, for on that last morning there was a vacillation of purpose that had decided the future. She realized afterwards that when he spoke of duty it had meant nothing to him at all, and even at the moment he had almost failed to convince her; but the phases of that interview were as difficult to recapture as the shapes of the rainclouds that had ceaselessly moved over the lake. She thought now that if she had been stronger she could have remade him, and kept him, but as it was she had wavered; and then it was too late.

Meanwhile, she showed nothing of her temptations and decisions as she sat in the faintly suggested twilight of the panelled alcove, sitting erect in her white satin dress, her head, with heavy, reddish hair drawn closely away from her broad temples, slightly but graciously inclined towards her companion. And he, all the time, had kept his familiar expression of impersonal amusement.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XII

JULIAN did not find it pleasant to remember how he had treated Blanche that last afternoon, and after a few days had gone by he ceased taxing his ingenuity to discover an excuse for himself. He was willing to acknowledge, handsomely, that jealousy had got the better of him, and that his behaviour had been a mistake all round—for it would be difficult to pick up the relationship just where it had been interrupted. The thought of Carfrae, too, was making him uneasy.

Regret is not a genial companion, but no one could know better than Julian how to get rid of such a one. He was usually able to exclude all but the flattering aspects of any given case, and, shifting his range, he regarded this present situation from such a distance that small, disagreeable considerations were lost. For instance, her position with regard to Society and to his own sex was a most interesting problem, and as though there were somebody near to applaud him he became eloquent in a sudden denunciation of the Church. If She allowed a husband and wife to separate at all, She should either let them go free or lock them up entirely, but not send each of them off with a fetter on one foot. A separated, religious Catholic woman—being a man, he thought chiefly of the Catholic wife—was a danger to Society, and he wondered what the end would be to Carfrae's devotion, to his own most complex feeling for her, and to Cecil's whim. For if a woman had a husband one knew just what to expect, while given these circumstances it was like walking in the dark. One had the opportunity, apparently, to see her openly and freely, and yet there existed (in her mind, at least, and after all her mind

Digitized by Google

was an important factor) a fixed prohibition to what might become the logical conclusion to such opportunities; but this prohibition was a barrier one sometimes forgot and sometimes hoped to surmount. One might find oneself in a pretty muddle!

Though he spent a whole evening meditating upon this, he was on his way to her the next day, without having decided upon the advisability or not of seeing her again so soon, or upon what he should say to her when he did. He obeyed his impulse, and then became aware that this thing had happened before, how often he did not really know, but often enough to have become familiar: to find himself on his way to Blanche ten minutes after he had decided not to go, or wondered if he wished to see her, or thought he might be more amused by doing something else instead. Sometimes he had gone thinking the time had come when she would disappoint him, and then something unexpected had always happened, or some unexpected sentiment had seized upon him, and she had appealed to him more keenly than ever. But in an uninterrupted cycle he had always been carried beyond that danger-point back to his state of analysis and doubt, and yet he was never free from her; all his thoughts revolved within her influence. He had never experienced such a thing before.

He arrived at the Convent in a state that touched upon trepidation, and, waiting on the doorstep in the quietness of the Square, his sense of dismay at the idea she might be out increased with every second that went by. The morning he had watched for her in vain outside her elocution teacher's had shaken his confidence that she would always be accessible to him.

The little grating in the door framed half of the porteress's face for a moment, and then she opened to him.

"Is Mrs. Benwell in?"

"Mrs. Benwell is not receiving to-day."

He stood a perceptible fraction of time without turning away, and the nun did not move, but looked at him patiently and compassionately. It crossed the surface

Digitized by Google

of his mind: "She doesn't really see me; I am not a man to her. . . . But if she stopped to think, I wonder what idea she would have of me."

He walked away. "A convent! The difference between that nun's point of view and mine—how extraordinary!" he thought. Then he went down into the depths of his feeling. "How am I to spend the rest of to-day without Blanche?"

He was forced to reflect he had spent four whole days away from Blanche without even going to inquire how she was.

"Armathwaite and that man Carfrae heard her recite, and I didn't. What was I doing that evening? Is it possible I had the chance of seeing and hearing her, and yet deliberately stayed away?"

And then he remembered that the nun hadn't said Blanche was out, but had said Mrs. Benwell was not receiving that day, and this suggested doubts that never left him during all the night.

That he would try to meet her after her elocution lesson admitted of no discussion, but the knowledge that he would be overwhelmingly disappointed if he did not see her made him terribly nervous that she would not be there; to be ready to be overwhelmingly disappointed seemed to court disappointment. He was in the street where stood her teacher's house far too early, feeling a little elated, and yet also ashamed and afraid.

He was afraid, because to long to see her as much as he did was the clearest indication he ought not to meet her. He knew that during those few minutes in the convent parlour before Carfrae appeared it was only her vagueness and unperceptiveness that had stopped him, on the brink of committing himself.

"I am always revolving in a circle, passing through the same situations with her, escaping from them in the same way;" and then he thought that to see her suddenly before him would be worth anything in the world. As he looked up the street again he felt all the symptoms of physical fear.

Digitized by Google

"How often have I waited like this in my life? And isn't it very probable I shall do it again? But I was quite sure it was over—at least, for many years. . . ."

He went past the door of No. 62, and came back.

The empty street, continuing empty, made him too afraid of what he might feel.

"Is Mrs. Benwell here to-day?"

"No Mrs. Benwell lives 'ere," said the servant hoarsely and indifferently.

"I know—I know. But she takes lessons here, elocution lessons, nearly every morning. Isn't there a class this morning?"

"There ain't no lesson to-day," answered the girl, swaying the door with her foot.

"Is there going to be one to-morrow?"

"I couldn't say, I'm sure. No one has told me."

"Then go and ask," said Julian.

She hesitated, made as if to close the door, then pushed it ajar and went away. Julian felt nothing but anger.

"The lessons will begin again on Tuesday—at least, maybe so and maybe not. There ain't nothink for sure just at present, that's what I've been told."

She coughed while looking at him indifferently and swaying the door, and when he turned without another word, she banged it behind him.

Again he was asking himself what he should do.

For over a week he did nothing at all, except to succeed, sometimes, in thinking he was forgetting her. But he was not forgetting her. All the same, he was sure he would never again be induced to wait for her in that drab-coloured street, looking at that miserable sky-line and thinking the same thoughts over and over in a circle. Nor would he call at the convent until it was positive she would see him; but as he also did not want to write, how on earth was he ever to meet her again? Perhaps the only way was by coming into touch with her through a common acquaintance—and he thought himself in luck when, late one evening, he met Cecil just leaving his

Digitized by Google

club; he greeted him very naturally, and asked him what he had been doing with himself.

Cecil was a little louder than usual, talked more, with less attention to the person to whom he was talking. He had never before adopted that manner with Julian, but it might have been manner; it did not necessarily imply a change of feeling.

He was full of a picture he had just bought, and some embellishments to the garden of his place in the North; and drawing Julian along to have supper at a small Italian restaurant not far off, which must be Bohemian because Carfrae often went there, he kept assuring him that the new picture might easily be a Mantegna. Julian must see it—the exquisite, incredible detail of it! His new terrace commanded a view that could not be beaten in the whole of England. As he described it his eyes wandered, and he might have been speaking to anyone in the world for all the recognition he gave the other man's individuality. Julian began to detest him. At supper all that Cecil ordered he disliked and would not have.

Their suppers together had been quite a feature of the early winter, and had been like undress rehearsals for the gatherings at Cecil's flat, the fantastic brilliance shown at those gatherings needing, like gymnastics, a certain amount of constant exercise. But while Julian's attitude to the extravagance of their wit was open irony and ridicule, Cecil could not quite be anything but serious about it, and there had been more diversion to be got out of the seriousness at the bottom of Cecil's exaggeratedness than out of anything he could say. These suppers had provided Julian, indeed, with the subtlest enjoyment, but on this particular evening he knew that the zest of all that time was utterly gone. The flatness of his mood made him more and more irritable, and to see Cecil languidly and yet absorbedly ordering supper seemed to be bringing his irritation to a head.

"Then order for yourself, my dear fellow," said Cecil,

Digitized by Google

suddenly a little nettled; and remarking that as long as he had to be a "poor soul carrying a corpse" he wanted the corpse to be as light as possible, Julian asked for a glass of vermouth and orange-juice, a drink he invented on the spur of the moment. It gave Cecil pause, as did Julian's remark, which seemed to Cecil quite as good as that quotation from Plato which had graced one of their suppers and been repeated afterwards, and the arrival of the drink threw his own champagne into the shade.

"What an antique stain there is to it, Julian! And the taste should bring back to one a memory of pyramids, and the workings of some Lybian sin."

"Is it not rather the essence of modernity?" answered Julian, touching each word with a delicately vicious emphasis. "The ineffectual bitterness of the taste borrowing interest from the affected iniquity of the colour, like a soul sated with Piccadilly seeking it's imaginations under Lybian moons."

"Ah, my dear Julian, don't you feel as I do, that the great defect of the age is the lack of any real background?" But the effort was not successful, and the conversation dropped to the level of mere questions.

"How is Mrs. Benwell?" Julian asked, when that became appropriate.

"Very well, very well," said Cecil, with raised eyebrows. "Never better."

"Has she been reciting lately?"

"Just the other day, at the Dickensons'—a great success. Her selections were charming—exquisite," he said, for that winter it was his favourite word. "She was much appreciated."

There was a pause.

"Did you see Carfrae while I was away?" asked Cecil suddenly.

The answer was: "Once or twice, I believe; a curious, Himalayan sort of person. Has he finished his play?"

"He will bother over the third act," said Cecil, relapsing from superiority into displeasure. "He says he can't get it as he wants it. But the two first acts are

Digitized by Google

practically in shape, and are," he added, half closing his eyes, the impartiality of the connoisseur raising him once more above annoyance, "a masterpiece. I really think they are almost perfect."

Julian looked at him darkly, nursing his dislike.

"But that third act! Is it conceivable that a man should write two acts of a masterpiece, and stop at the third, declaring he has no idea for it?"

"I should suggest a continental cure," said Julian, getting up.

"Julian, you are perfect. I shall repeat that to George. Here he is now! My excellent George, we were even then invoking your name."

Julian saw that Carfrae, who had so unsuspectingly entered the restaurant, hesitated a perceptible instant on catching sight of the two of them, but, as there was nothing to be done, he came forward with an impassive face.

"Sit down, George, for I haven't seen you for an age. What will you have? Don't go, Julian."

"I am to meet another man here this evening, so I had better get a table of my own," said Carfrae.

"That won't be difficult, as the place is almost empty. Sit here till your man arrives."

As soon as he had caught sight of the dramatist Julian's feeling for Blanche became acute, and Carfrae's continued presence kept it at that same, as it were artificial pitch of intensity. And what was going on in Carfrae's mind, he thought, while Cecil's voice, in a monologue, flowed over two preoccupations? A fortnight before he, Julian, had been sure of his influence over her, and in the company of these two men it would have amused him to think he had won the woman he believed they all three were in love with. Now he was of all three the least in touch, and it enraged him to think that he had fallen back into his former position of depending upon the other two to hear about her.

"But I will go every day to the convent till I do see her!"

Digitized by Google

"Do you know any of the habitués here, George?" Cecil was saying. "An interesting place this, if one knew the people. All Italian, probably. And you're a Socialist at bottom, you know, though you may not confess it."

He considered the people at the other tables indulgently.

"There's a great deal of Socialism in Italy itself, but national movements are often hatched in a foreign country. That type over there, George—purely anarchistic. And the woman with him—a virago! But her vitality excuses her. Vitality is such a precious thing one mustn't quarrel with its exuberance."

"I can't stand this any longer," thought Julian, but he went on waiting.

"Very Italian face," said Cecil.

"And yet I believe she is a Russian, all the same."

"Do you know many Russians?" asked Julian suddenly of Carfrae.

"I can't think of any, if I do, just at this moment."

"She looks very ill," continued Cecil. . . . "By the way, George, how is the scarlet fever among the nuns at the convent?"

Julian had a physical sensation of the blood draining away from his face.

"I'm afraid there is another case of it; but the patients have been taken to the infirmary, and are carefully isolated. There is no danger, I think, except that the boarders may all be quarantined."

"Blanche ought to leave, you know. It is ridiculous—she may at any moment be quarantined, and then, where would we be? Why can't she look for lodgings elsewhere? It's going on for April, and I wanted her to act during the summer. And as she can't act and yet live at the convent, why doesn't she make the break now?"

"Have you advised her to leave?" asked Carfrae.

"I think I have—why, yes, of course I have. But I wish you would as well."

Digitized by Google

"He hasn't seen her either," thought Julian. "But Carfrae has."

"That is my man, just coming in," said the dramatist. "I must join him. Good-night, Armathwaite." He nodded to Julian and walked away, while Cecil, behind him, exclaimed discontentedly: "Isn't that like George? Whenever one wants to talk to him he goes away. And now you too, Julian."

Julian could hardly get away quickly enough, but what he had just learnt was well worth two evenings spent in such society. It seemed an extremely important piece of news. Scarlet fever at the convent! Mightn't it explain something? And as he walked home he plunged deeper into dreams of how her change of lodgings might affect their destiny.

He chanced to go to Crookby's next morning, and a discovery he made there—this time not a book—would have furnished him with an excellent excuse had he needed one to go to see her. He went on Sunday afternoon, noticing on the way the Sunday quiet of the streets, but for once the complete cessation of traffic and the holiday attire of the lower classes did not annoy him.

"Will she wear a new dress, I wonder? It is like a spring day to-day. How will she dress in summer——"

The square before the convent was perceptibly greener since the last time he had been. That last time! . . .

"If you'll come in, I think you'll find Mrs. Benwell in the parlour already——"

It seemed as though it must be untrue. And the pious statues in the circular hallway swam before him, for to find here the goal of his hopes was all at once too fantastic to be credible.

"I'm not sure if she's in here or in St. Mary's parlour," said the porteress. "We can soon find out——"

But before she could open the door it opened from within, and he and Blanche came face to face with each other—and it was as if she had suddenly shone upon him, she was on the instant so near, with her pale and

Digitized by Google

yet luminous colouring, and after the shock of encounter he looked at her in a persistent amazement that, for all the suddenness, it was her face, her features, her expression; that it was she.

"Mrs. Benwell, how long is it since I have seen you——"

Then he saw she was not alone, but that a girl with a fresh, round face was standing just behind her and was waiting to say good-bye. His movement to let her pass was, evidently, what made Blanche remember her again, and she turned back to her friend, who caught her passive hand and held it.

"Then *au revoir*, and I will write to you soon."

"Yes," said Blanche, "I hope soon," and without recovering herself sufficiently to say a word to Julian she accompanied the departing visitor as far as the front-door. Julian waited where he was, deeply occupied by the fact she wore a hat, and a dress he had seen her wear but once before, and that a bunch of primroses made a faint flame in her bosom. It seemed as though those moments of watching and waiting for her, while she performed a little service for another person before returning to him, were the most perfect he could ever know.

But when she returned there was a heightened colour in her cheeks, and that and the more than ordinary hesitation in her manner made him feel she had changed towards him. And it was his fault. At that moment he could not remember what had happened; he could only feel that he had been cruel to her.

"I have something to say to you. Where can we go?"

"But in here," she answered, indicating the half-open door. . . .

"There are people in there. Can't we be alone?"

"The parlours are all full—you see there are so many visitors on Sunday always! But only three people are in here"—and after lingering another instant they went in.

An old lady in black was sitting in the corner of the horsehair sofa with a younger woman beside her, while a

Digitized by Google

little boy of six or seven years old was looking at pictures in an album. Julian had never before seen that particular room, which was smaller than the other parlour but furnished in the same way. It had two windows on the garden, and that suggested to him to ask, in a low voice:

"Can't we go in the garden for a while?"

"I am afraid it isn't open to visitors to-day," said Blanche, with her note of timidity, "because the sisters are preparing the Calvary for Good Friday."

But he could not forget the presence of the two ladies, even though he and Blanche went over to the window farthest away from the sofa; his eyes kept turning back to them, and he did not know what disturbed him most, that, or the memory of that terrible last time.

He thought it was because she too remembered that she turned away her head, but he could not speak because of those figures in the corner.... Her arm lay along the window-sill, and she looked out into the garden, where a young verdure was outlining the ash-coloured branches against the softly clouded sky.

"It is such a long time since I have seen you——" he said at last.

"Do you know what day it is to-day?" she interrupted suddenly. "It is Palm Sunday. Had you remembered?" and again the blood rose to her cheeks.

"Did you know I had called on you a few days after—well, nearly two weeks ago? I couldn't be happy without your news. I wanted to know you were all right again even if you did not want to see me."

"But I have been all right for weeks, thank you, so much! I was soon well again. It was nothing...."

He would far rather have had her reproach him than have her put him aside with this haste and embarrassment, and the idea that she was hostile, and that Carfrae was winning her, shook him horribly. But it was difficult to ask her forgiveness, because the cruelty of what he had done had been so indefinable.

"I've wanted, too, to tell you why I didn't go to the Dickensons'—and to tell you I have hated myself ever

Digitized by Google

since that Saturday afternoon. I have wanted to come to you and explain—— "

" But it is all right. Oh ! please—— " she said quickly. " Don't feel you must speak of it. Don't ever speak of it again. I ask you. It is all right," she said, smiling at him, " it is quite all right."

That long smile dwelling on him enveloped and penetrated him with sweetness; he felt it opening doors to him, and he entered into a silent chamber of the soul that was unknown to him and that he was still too afraid to explore.

She turned her head away and once more looked out into the garden, while he sat not daring to move and not saying a word. They might have sat in silence for a long time if more people had not come into the room and broken the spell. This time it was a nun who ushered in a friend, and showed her a chair with little nervous bows and gusts of laughter, rubbing her hands in the shadow of her floating sleeves; her starched wimple creaked with the movements of her head, which she had a way of posing like a bird. Blanche's eyes pondered over her, and over the leave-taking of the youngish woman who had been sitting on the sofa; the little boy rose reluctantly from the floor where he had laid out all the pictures—submitted to a duty-kiss from the old lady, and the three went slowly out of the room.

" To be alone with her !" thought Julian, and he said to her with an effort:

" I hear there is scarlet fever among the nuns."

" But how did you know about it ?"

" I heard. . . . Have many nuns been taken ill ?"

" Two have been taken. Sister Ethelburga, for one. But you never knew her."

" You aren't worried about them, are you ?"

" I don't think they are in danger, but it is very sad for the convent. And supposing more people should be taken ill !"

" Are you leaving the convent because of the infection ?"

" That is what Mr. Armathwaite wants me to do. I

Digitized by Google

haven't seen him very lately, but he was kind enough to write me a note about it. I have asked George's advice——" She stopped, but he, perfectly at rest about Carfrae now, asked quite naturally:

"What does he say?"

"He is not sure what would be best for me to do. He is afraid of the infection, though I am not, for they wouldn't have visitors here if there was any danger; but, on the other hand, he doesn't want me to live anywhere else. He says he doesn't like the idea of lodgings for me. I suppose he thinks I am unpractical! I would like to go to another convent, because I am so used to them; but if I am to act later, I will have to live in lodgings. That is what Mr. Armathwaite said. He says, why do I make two moves instead of one?"

"What does Mr. Carfrae say to that?"

"He surprised me very much by asking me the other day if I didn't want to give up the idea of acting altogether. I said I would be glad."

"Would you really be glad?"

"Yes; but, on the other hand, I can't believe I am really ever going to act, so if you told me now I needn't I wouldn't feel much difference."

He was silent.

"And yet I must," she said, after a pause. "I thought if George absolved me from my promise, perhaps I really would give up the idea of acting. But he said the next day that it would be too great a disappointment if I didn't act in his play."

"So he has no logical advice to offer."

"My promise to him still holds good. As for lodgings, Mr. Armathwaite wrote he could find some nice ones for me."

"Mrs. Benwell, I went to Crookby's yesterday, and while I was in that little inner room, among the books, I noticed a door in the corner. Did you ever notice it? The old man was more talkative than he is generally, and I asked him where the door led to. He said it gave on some stairs, and they led to a sort of covered passage-

Digitized by Google

way built up in the courtyard of the house behind the shop. He lives in the other house, which is connected with his shop in this way. I asked him if I could see the house, for I thought it might be old, and the idea of a courtyard took my fancy. Do you know, it is wonderful! It is one of four or five houses in a row, in a little blind alley that must date from the beginning of the seventeenth century. A little forgotten corner, almost as priceless as some of the Inns. The houses are very much like those in Clifford's Inn. The fronts are plain, or have been restored, but the entrances are the same. The house where Crookby lives has a panelled passage and old-fashioned bannisters. Such an echoing house! Crookby has two rooms at the very top, and it is his niece who keeps the house, and keeps it very clean. She sometimes takes in lodgers, but she has none at the present moment. I thought of you at once, for I had heard of the scarlet fever here, and felt sure you would have to move. Crookby's is an excellent neighbourhood for you if you act—right at the door of all the theatres. I want you to live there so much, for I couldn't bear to think of you in an ordinary London lodging."

"How kind of you!" she said, when he came to an end. "How kind!"

"But won't you consider it?" he insisted. He looked around at the nun and her friend, who were stealing glances in his direction, and added with energy: "Don't you think it would be better for you to leave?"

"It is kind of you to think of it," she repeated.

The interest of what he had been saying, the desire to have her consent to what he was asking, it all dropped from him, and he only knew she was there. And he could not get accustomed to seeing her before him, but with that same amazement with which he had met her he kept looking at her, her face, her hands, and the primroses in her dress.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

A change came over Blanche, and as he felt her emotion his heart beat harder.

Digitized by Google

"I was wondering if you were ever going to see the chapel here, though you once said you would like to. Couldn't—couldn't we go this afternoon? I have my hat on, and it would be so simple; and I've always wanted to show the chapel to you——"

She hung on his answer.

"If you want it," he said, after a long pause.

She rose at once, and he felt that her gesture cut the day in two. He even felt older as he followed her down a wide corridor, which was carpeted with a strip of matting, and had a grated window at the far end. They met no one on the way, but even if he had wished it he would not have taken that opportunity to speak to her, for she was so intent on her idea he had the feeling that to speak to her would be an ugly interruption. Before opening the chapel door she waited as if to give them both time to prepare themselves, and, in spite of his previous strong reluctance, when they entered it was a solemn moment. He stopped short when the chapel met his eyes. The stillness in that slender vista of columns was the very spirit of sanctuary.

Long shafts of fading light from the south-west slanted across the floor, but the rich eastern window was in shadow, and the altar, profusely decorated with palms and flowers, rose mysterious in a jewelled gloom. Past incense hung in wreaths about the chancel, and the odour mingled with the heavy perfume of lilies. The curtain of the door fell behind them, and they were alone; and when she had dipped in Holy Water he touched her fingers with his. As she watched him cross himself her face seemed to give out light, and then she moved on up the centre aisle. But though she had won a victory over him he had begun to resist her again, and his resistance was all the stronger because he had surrendered once. When she stopped at her chair he did not take the seat beside her, as in her pause she seemed to expect him to do. He moved over into another corner, and while she fell on her knees he tried to recover himself.

Why and how had they come? Why had he let him-

Digitized by Google

self be brought ? For some time past now he had wanted to separate the believer in her from the woman, and when he felt her spirit trying again to draw his into its orbit he hardened against her. The first time he had gone to see her, and she had told him the story of her conversion, it had been different. He had been stirred by her almost as he might have been by something beautiful in art, and in her convent setting she was so perfect that he would not have had a detail of it changed. But as the woman became more and more significant to him the believer in her roused his resentment, and he regretted its existence with everything in him—and not only because her conscience was bound up in her religion. Even while her conscience remained unawakened the woman receded at times, leaving him alone with the believer. And it was the woman only that he wanted. If ever he were moved, as once or twice he most unexpectedly had been, by that part of her personality he wished to do without, he denied the moment of sentimentality even to himself.

The light shifted a little, and the shadows of the chancel seemed to thicken. There was something majestic in the waiting altar, receiving adoration from the praying figures of the statues on either side. But between him and that strange solemnity was the golden floor, and Blanche kneeling in the pool of the sunset. He and she were alone in a narrow aisle of slender columns. . . . What a moment, and what a setting, what an opportunity !

" As she stood after I had left her side, as if asking why I had left her, she reminded me of Petrarch's—

> " ' Chinava a terra il bel guardo gentile,
> E tacendo dicea, come a me parve;
> Chi m'allontana il mio diletto amico ?' "

He repeated: " ' Il mio diletto amico !' If I could teach her such things ! If I could *teach* her. . . . To hear her lips murmuring, ' *Il mio diletto amico !*' "

The sense of frustration was so great he could have

Digitized by Google

groaned. To be alive and throbbing in this tomb of dogma, wondering if that other being would ever awake! As he watched her his whole consciousness began to centre upon the hope of her awakening—the hope that she would stir, suddenly open her eyes, and become aware of him.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIII

THE Reverend Mother had called her to the office that morning, and with the affectionate friendliness of all their talks had suggested to her, after a short preamble, not to receive too many visitors, by which she meant those men friends who were neither relations nor connected with her future profession. She did not advise with the authority of Father Dudley, she deferred to Blanche's judgment, but Blanche had nothing to say, no arguments to offer. She had felt herself growing scarlet with a shame she could not define, for she knew it was Julian who was meant. But why—why should it be Julian? Why couldn't he come? She found it impossible to ask. Instead, she begged to be told if receiving these visitors were against the convent rules, and she was answered so evasively that she took away the impression it did not look well before the other boarders. If that were the only reason, she kept thinking, it was indeed hard. . . . And now that Cecil Armathwaite had called, she could not make up her mind to go down to him. She felt that the only thing that could help her would be to stay alone and weep. The porteress had only just knocked at the door, and said Mr. Armathwaite was downstairs, but the idea that the porteress looked askance as she gave the message made her shrink all over. What made it even worse was that Carfrae, too, was coming that day. She now felt such an excessive sensitiveness about these visitors that she did not see how she could face the convent people, who would know she was again receiving them. And then it was the fact she was allowed to receive Cecil Armathwaite, that he was the one who, because he was connected with her future profession,

Digitized by Google

could quite well come and see her, that brought her tears so near she felt she could not hold them back. . . .

"Let us go out," he said, when he caught sight of her. He was standing at the foot of the stairs. "I don't think I have ever been in the garden."

"If you wait a moment, I will get the key."

She found it hanging on a nail just inside the door, but the lock was stiff, and so difficult to turn that Cecil came forward to help her. Because of the narrowness of the passage she was obliged to press herself against the wall to keep out of his way, and those moments seemed eternal.

He loitered down the path bordered with lilac-bushes, asking questions about the nuns, their hours of recreation, and the rules of their Order, and all the time she kept involuntarily a pace ahead of him.

"This is the visitors' walk. The nuns never come here alone; they always keep to the other part of the garden. But here is Sister Clotilda now! That is because she has a visitor."

"A nun should walk in a garden only at twilight," answered Cecil. "When the whole of Nature is reflective, and inclines to the mystery of prayer. In the afternoon we are too busy, the sunlight is too crude. . . . By the way," he added, "what are they doing about the scarlet fever?"

"Nothing, nothing. I mean, the doctors are taking every precaution, and there have been no more cases."

"And yet haven't you been advised to leave? I, too, really think it would be wise——"

"Is there any danger of infection, do you think? And yet there can't be! Visitors are still allowed to come, and that shows there can't be any danger. Ought I to leave? We are not being quarantined. Why do you want me to leave?" she asked, turning quickly towards him.

"I," stammered Cecil—"I have no special reason for it. . . . Except that I really have your health at heart, my dear Mrs. Benwell," he added.

"It is, in a way, difficult for me to leave," she said,

Digitized by Google

walking much more slowly now. "I am so used to it here. But if you think . . ." She stopped. "Shall we sit down ?"

He showed an extravagant concern as he took his seat beside her on the bench.

"You are not feeling ill, I hope ? One has no idea how infectious . . ."

"You mustn't worry about me. I am only—only a little worried about this question of having to go away."

"Do you want to stay so much ?" he asked.

Blanche quickly looked up, her lips parted, and her blush was so violent that it seemed to bring tears to her eyes.

"What reason," Cecil continued, with a show of amusement, not noticing the effect of his question upon her, "do you think I could have for wishing you to leave the convent ?"

She clasped her hands together, and shook her head. He smiled indulgently, but just as he began to speak she interrupted:

"Then what am I to do with Mary ? She has another ten days of holiday, and is coming to me on Wednesday, and I don't know where I can take her if I decide to leave. On the other hand, ought I to have her here without first asking permission of her school ? It seems —I am sure you won't understand, because it is such a little matter—but it seems as though I couldn't decide, I couldn't decide !"

"But it is so simple," said Cecil. "You must leave."

With her hands still tightly clasped together, she murmured an incoherent reply. The idea it might be dangerous to stay on at the convent had been in the background of her mind ever since her talk with Reverend Mother that morning, and to have someone urging her to leave produced a restlessness she had never known before. She did not know what she ought to think, for the practical details that seemed to multiply with every moment had obscured the principal issue entirely.

Digitized by Google

"Let me decide for you," continued Cecil. "You must get away from here; this warm weather is quite too much for you. My sister has a little place in Surrey, and you must go there for a week or two with Mary. I will send Adeline a telegram to-night, and we can arrange it delightfully. It will be quite delightful."

It was as though she were returning from a long distance when she became aware of Cecil Armathwaite again, and after gazing at him she drew back.

"But I don't know your sister."

"That will not matter, for I will be there, and my sister and I are very congenial. She would be delighted that any friend of mine——"

"I couldn't do that," said Blanche. "I hope you will understand."

"But, Mrs. Benwell, my sister——"

"Thank you so much—I appreciate so much . . . Besides, I am not ill. And I don't want to leave London just now."

"You mustn't feel you cannot accept an invitation through me; on the contrary, I want you to know all my friends and all the people that I know."

Every word he said increased her wretchedness, for he seemed to have suddenly acquired the power to torment her with his voice and every gesture of his hands.

"Yes, yes, I would be only too pleased, but I don't want to leave London just now. If you really think it is not safe to have Mary here, I will go to lodgings. I—I think I know of some."

"But, as I wrote you, I know of a very good place," he said. "A sort of private hotel, quite close to the theatres, and yet quite new and comfortable."

"I have heard of rooms near the Strand, too, that sound very nice. I think I would like to see them. They are—in fact, they are just behind the bookshop where you took me once, long ago; do you remember? It was called Crookby's."

"Of course I know Crookby, but I didn't know of any house. Who told you about it?"

Digitized by Google

"I have been to Crookby's several times since the day I went with you, but——"

"Did you see the rooms?"

"No. It was—it was really Mr. Eames who told me about them."

"When did you see Julian for him to tell you this?"

Blanche trembled, stirred by the very mention of his name; she had been drawn by an irresistible force to speak of Crookby's rooms, because she had foreseen she would have to mention Julian if she did; and with his name coming nearer and nearer she had not noticed how Cecil turned towards her, nor, trembling at having finally pronounced it, did she quite realize that he had got to his feet.

"When did you see Julian?"

"He told me about these rooms last Sunday week, on Palm Sunday."

"Where did you see him then?"

She raised her eyes to him with an unexpected dignity. "Why do you ask me that? He came to see me here." Memory was too sweet, and almost involuntarily she added: "I showed him the chapel. He is a Catholic."

"He has often gone to church with you, I suppose? But I needn't ask! He is such a very religious man."

For a second, while she seemed about to answer, Blanche's face was lit up vividly, as if by a fire within, and though she did not say what her face implied, she answered just as effectively by rising from the bench.

"You have never seen the whole of the garden," she said. "So shall we go on?"

"I would rather go back to the house," answered Cecil, his features altered and sharpened as though he were struggling with a torrent of abuse, and in silence they took the direction of the convent.

Then, as they walked, his silence began to frighten Blanche, and in a sudden flurry she reproached herself for having offended him; this seemed to make her like him better, and forgetting that acute withdrawing of herself she had had on catching sight of his hands, she felt she must repair what she had done.

Digitized by Google

"Won't you stay a little longer, Mr. Armathwaite? I will call Sister Florida—— "

"Please do not trouble," he answered grandly.

He had been thinking only of Julian's treachery, but as he saw Blanche bareheaded against a hedge of budding lilac-trees, one hand loosely gathering up her flowing skirt, and when he noticed the little light curls blowing on her forehead, he realized, piercingly, what it would mean not to have her in his life—not to have her as an audience, as his discovery, and the walking proof of his appreciations.

"Let me come oftener to see you! Why did you write I could see you only on Mondays and Thursdays?"

"It is a rule Reverend Mother advised me to make—to have fixed days for receiving visitors—and oh! I cannot break through it!"

She hesitated on the step of the garden door, and then he came nearer, and a feeling of cold ran over her.

"Won't you come in?"

"No, I am going. I have no right, it seems—— "

"Right to do what?"

"To ask you a question."

"It isn't a question of having a right. Why do you put it that way? It is because. . . . It is only that I would rather not know what it is."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Benwell, but please, I beg you, remember I shall always be ready if you want me, in whatever way."

These melodramatic airs only made her the more anxious—she did not see through them. She and Cecil had come along the little passage into the circular entrance-hall, and she followed him a few steps on his way to the street.

"I will let you know—— " she began. Her kindness wanted him to stay, that she might explain away his grievance—which, however, she did not quite understand—and yet at the same time she herself was infinitely relieved that he was going. He departed, thinking, for all his perturbation, of the impression he had made, while she,

Digitized by Google

leaning for support against the wall, took up her thoughts just where his visit had interrupted them.

The problem of thinking was too dreadful, and she let it slip; everything that happened seemed to be threatening her, and only the outside world was peaceful. The languor of a spring afternoon was in the air, and through the door that she had left ajar came the moist scent of the garden. A certain mellowness softened the chilly-looking hall and black-and-white paved floor. Opposite her a plaster statue of the Blessed Virgin, coldly blue, stood on a pedestal, and before the sandalled feet a bunch of violets was lying. Blanche's eyes wandered over the words that were painted in black on the white pedestal—*Ora pro Nobis*—and over the regular design of golden lilies on the wall. Then, closing her eyes, she let the minutes go by, and when she heard Sister Clotilda's voice in the garden it brought her back with such a start she thought she must have dozed. The empty hall seemed suddenly cold and unfamiliar. . . . But her moment of unconsciousness had been, not so much like sleep as like wandering in a chaos of melancholy, in which she had merely forgotten she was still standing and leaning against a wall.

She was making up her mind to go upstairs when the bell tinkled, and she quickly opened the door of the room behind her and hid herself; she was sure it was Carfrae, and all her reluctance at the thought of meeting the porteress returned. She heard Carfrae's voice asking for her, and to her relief the porteress showed him into the other parlour before going upstairs on what was to be a vain errand. Only when she had disappeared round the bend of the staircase, did Blanche cross the hall.

"Oh!" she said, on the threshold of the other room. "How strange it feels in here!"

"It smells of Brussels carpet and book-leather," answered Carfrae, practically. "But that is nothing new. We must open a window."

And while he was opening it, to the soft wind and the echoes of the distant thoroughfare, she said in a low voice, as if to herself:

Digitized by Google

"It made me suddenly remember the first time I went back to the convent in Rome after I had got well from the fever. One of the sisters showed me into the parlour and shut the door. . . . It all came back to me," she said, sitting down and leaning her arms listlessly on the table. "How I waited, and how happy I was. At least I remember the room, but I can't remember how it felt to be happy in just that way."

"Have you been happy in different ways since then?"

"I don't know. Oh! yes, of course I have. Happy in that way too, very often since, thank God."

"But not now."

"George," she said. "How do you know?"

"Because you have just told me so yourself."

"I ought to be, that is the strange part. Very happy in that way, in every way—the happiest person in the world. But I'm not," she said, putting her hand on her heart. "I don't know why."

"Has anything happened?"

"No, nothing. I made a retreat during four days of Easter Week, and I was happy because, besides everything else, a prayer of mine had been answered. I could hardly believe it had really happened, it was so wonderful. And then to-day I seem to be in a fog." She looked around the room. "It's almost as though I were afraid."

Carfrae made a movement towards her, and then checked himself.

"And then this question as to my leaving the convent——"

He asked quite suddenly, and yet with an admirable display of casualness:

"Has Julian Eames been to see you about that?"

"Yes, he has. But I never saw him for the two weeks that Father Dudley advised me about."

"You always seem to explain yourself about him."

"What do you mean? Explain? I was only telling you. He came to tell me about some rooms he had seen that might do for me. I don't know how he knew I was thinking of leaving."

Digitized by Google

"I was there when Armathwaite told him."

"Were you? Where and when was it?"

"It was a week or two ago. I met them by chance at a restaurant where he and Armathwaite were having supper together, and Armathwaite asked me about the scarlet fever here. I don't think Mr. Eames had heard of it before."

"In a restaurant!" she said. "I wonder what it was like——"

"What about these rooms he told you of?"

"They are behind Crookby's—the bookshop, you know. He said it was an old house, very pretty—panelled, I think he said——"

"Are you thinking of going there soon?"

"How strange you are! You talk as though you wanted me to go. And last time you were all against my leaving here——"

"I'm all against it still."

"And why? I can't have Mary here; her convent would be sure not to allow it. I ought to leave; I ought to leave before Mary comes on Wednesday. I could take her to the rooms over Crookby's, and then when her holidays were over I could come back here——"

"The last time I was here you, too, were all against leaving."

"No, no," she said. "Not against it! Not exactly that!"

"What does Father Dudley say?"

"I haven't seen him for a week, for he, too, has been ill, with influenza. And Reverend Mother has advised nothing definite, for she doesn't want the boarders to leave. Besides, it is such a little matter where I go, I don't like to worry anyone about it."

"It isn't a little matter to some people. Don't you know why Armathwaite and Julian Eames want you to leave the convent and live elsewhere? They have a reason for being so interested, you may depend on it."

"Don't frighten me. What can it be? They are afraid of the infection, perhaps."

Digitized by Google

"Infection? Nonsense! They think they will be able to see you more comfortably if you live in lodgings, away from the eye of Reverend Mother."

"Don't frighten me," she repeated. . . . "Oh, how can you impute such motives to people? I am ashamed of you, that you should say such a thing!"

"You would say it yourself if—well, I suppose, if you were different."

"I am glad I am not different if it would mean such ideas as those! Thinking the worst of people! And I would like to show you you are wrong in every way—about me, because wherever I am, without Mother or my confessor, I hope I shall do my duty, and what I think God expects of me. . . . But I am arrogant!" she exclaimed, interrupting him. "I can't say that! I would try, and, God willing, I would succeed——"

"Blanche, I didn't mean that. Can you think I meant such a thing as a doubt of you? I not only know you would try, I am sure you would succeed!"

"Then how can you say it of him? I am sure of him, too!"

"I didn't speak only of him, if you mean Julian Eames by 'him.' I spoke of Armathwaite as well."

"Even of Mr. Armathwaite," she answered, but her breath began to come less quickly. "Of him, too. . . ."

Just then a nun, opening the door, put in her face and a corner of her wimple.

"Mrs. Benwell, Sister Catherine would like to speak to you for a minute. Can you come at once?"

"Will you wait? I want to see you again, and I am sure it won't be long."

It should have been evening again, for he was reminded so much of that other time that he felt Sister Catherine must come in and find him waiting in the dusk. He felt an even greater fear than on that other evening, a greater discomfort. And then he thought of himself and the play, and acutely and unexpectedly he visualized his room and the desk where he would write. Sometimes a word or a phrase, an aspect of the streets or of a person's face, the merest detail, sufficed to awake the writing instinct

Digitized by Google

within him, and in an instant, as if he had taken a drug which immediately effected some hallucination, words like visions began to gather in his brain. As he stood looking inward he felt a great impetus towards home and the desk that was waiting for him; but suddenly, "Does all this anger go with the rest of Helena's character?" he thought.

When she came back he was walking up and down, and as she shut the door he stared at her, as if expecting to find some sign of change in her very appearance.

"It is all decided for me," she said, with intense quiet.

"What is decided?"

"That I am going to leave to-night, at once. I have just seen Reverend Mother. Another of the nuns is ailing, and the doctor may have to declare a quarantine, and Mother does not see why I need stay and run the risk of that. One of the boarders was leaving to-night in any case, and I am going to take that as an excuse and go with her. The doctor thinks, privately, there isn't an atom of danger of our spreading contagion. . . . I said I would be ready in an hour, and now I must go up and pack my things."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I am going to look at the rooms over Crookby's, and see if they will suit."

Carfrae answered nothing to that, and there was a sort of uneasiness between them; the things they could say they rejected, and explanations became impossible after the pause.

"If you don't want me to——"

"One lodging is very like another; and besides, what right have I to tell you what you should or shouldn't do?"

"But, George, you have every right to tell me what you think."

"I think I had better take you there myself, this evening, and arrange things for you. You don't know the genus landlady quite as well as I."

"But I am not going to be alone, you know. One of

Digitized by Google

the other boarders, a German girl, the sister of a friend of mine who used to live here, is coming with me."

"I am glad of that. And now, shall I wait till you're ready, or shall I go away for an hour and then come back for you ?"

"Perhaps you had better go away and come back," answered Blanche, ready to appeal to his judgment now that she knew he was docile to her wishes. "And I must make haste. You will excuse me, won't you ?"

As soon as she knew, definitely, that she must leave, she passed from moments of delight to others heavy with an inexplicable sense of guilt. And as she ran upstairs she kept thinking, "Is it right ? Is it right ?" Yet she had no choice—she was obliged to go; but she repeated that she had no choice as though she could not believe it was true. Then, while she groped round the corner of the landing to her room, for it was getting dark, she seemed to hear a pulse beating steadily in the silence of the house, and, pausing to take breath, she felt herself grow faint with expectation.

A lamp had been lit and placed upon her dressing-table, though the curtains were not yet drawn. She could see the tops of the trees below her window, and the dimness of the garden stretching towards the dark edge of a block of houses.

"What sort of a room will I sleep in to-night ?"

She began at once to pack, and while folding her things she thought of the changes that had occurred in her life; and then this change began to seem like an adventure, as she had never before left any place at such short notice. However much she tried to see matters in their graver light she could no longer repress a feeling of exhilaration. . . . Frieda Marks came in to discuss their plans, and see if she might help, though she had her own packing to do. She, too, was excited. "I will have my meals alone with you !" she said to Blanche. "There will be just you and I, and we can order what we like to eat !"

Time seemed to fly, and Blanche could not believe

Digitized by Google

that the hour was up when one of the lay-sisters knocked and asked if the boxes were ready.

"Come in, Sister, but I'm afraid I'm not quite ready. What a time I've been! And yet I haven't so many worldly possessions to take with me!"

The last things to be put away were her crucifix and the little objects on her altar, and as she went to take the former from the wall she was shocked for the first time by the meaning of departure. This, after all, had been her home. To leave it ought to mean more to her than it did; and, standing before her crucifix, she could not bring herself to take it from its nail. Even the knowledge that she would unpack it again that evening did not comfort her.

The lay-sister had pulled the smaller trunk into the passage, and was coming back for the other, and Blanche could hear that unelastic tread behind her in the room. The nun wore a sleepy and tired expression as though nothing could ever surprise her, and her evident lack of interest in this crisis was another shock to Blanche. With the fever of departure growing in her, she watched the nun for a moment—the yellow-white, unhealthy face turned towards the lamp, and the heavy, pale hands emerging from the black habit—and she made a quick gesture of protest.

"Sister, I can do all the rest myself. Could you go to the Community-Room and ask Sister Catherine if I may see her to say good-bye?"

She knew when it came to packing her little pious objects that she could never have done it with the nun's eyes upon her. These things were really sacred to her; to touch them was a rite, and by the time the sister returned Blanche had in her own mind cut herself adrift. She had started on her journey, and was already far.

"Sister Catherine will see you in the front hall, Mrs. Benwell, and Mr. Carfrae is waiting for you. He's been whistling for a four-wheeler."

"I am ready. I have only to put on my hat."

Digitized by Google

She mutely said good-bye to her room in a long look from the threshold, and on her way downstairs she was pursued by a fear of the future. It had grown to panic when she saw Carfrae in the vestibule.

"My boxes will be down in a moment, but Frieda Marks is spending the night with a friend. She isn't coming with us. Have you been waiting long? Hasn't Sister Catherine come yet?"

"I haven't seen her," answered Carfrae.

"Then, if you don't mind, I'll just see if she is in chapel." But the chapel was empty. Out of habit, she went in and knelt down near the door, but the large shadows and the red light glowing in the centre of the altar distracted her attention; and then she felt there was no time to pray. Had she begun to think, or to remember, so many thoughts would have crowded upon her that she could never have left in time. And she was driven by a conviction that she must make haste, nor lose a minute in delay. She hurried back to the front hall, and was amazed at the leisureliness with which Carfrae and the cabman were handling her luggage.

"We must be quick," she said. "Where is Sister Catherine?"

"I'll fetch her," said the lay-sister, who, with her look of fatigue, was watching the luggage being carried down to the four-wheeler. She started to go upstairs, but paused on the half-landing to turn the gas a little lower, and Blanche could not understand why she should think of this at such a moment.

"Are the boxes being safely tied on? Are you ready to go?" But without waiting for an answer she hurried back into the hall.

"Have I forgotten anything?" she said aloud. "Where is Sister Catherine? I am coming, I am coming," though there was no one to hear. "But I must say good-bye to Sister Catherine." She walked to and fro between the stairs and the vestibule. "Sister!" she called again.

There was the sound of a step on the landing above, and Sister Catherine, her black veil floating behind her,

Digitized by Google

came swiftly round the bend of the staircase. She glanced once over the bannisters to see if Blanche were below, and then glided onwards, holding out her hands. Blanche ran to her, and they met half-way up the flight. The nun put her hands on Blanche's shoulders and looked into her face, and after that long look they kissed each other in silence.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIV

As soon as the cab turned the corner out of Farawell Street she had leaned forward to see the old houses of which Julian had spoken, and she had been as excited when the cab drew up as though something extraordinary were going to happen. The street or place, walled up at one end, looked rather like a courtyard it was so narrowly enclosed, and there was a forgotten air about it, an indescribable atmosphere of remoteness. Nothing was stirring within sight, and after they had rung the bell the silence settled again, while the fronts of the houses, on both sides, seemed to sag forward a little in the light of the one street-lamp. But above the level of the wall at the other end the low sky was red with the reflection of London, and, listening in what seemed to be a silence, she became aware that the distance was loaded with a steady burden of sound. Then the door had been opened, and she had seen a long, narrow passage, and a light on a bracket shining over panelling that was so polished it looked almost as though it were oiled.

With morning came a different mood. Frieda Marks arrived towards eleven o'clock, and there was a consultation as to what they could afford between them. The rooms were more expensive than those at the convent, and at first Frieda wished to look elsewhere for cheaper, while Blanche was anxious to remain where she was. Carfrae, after interviewing the landlady, had seen the rooms and had pronounced them to be, though not exactly cheap, not particularly expensive, and Blanche thought this justified her in staying. She would not have known the house was so old, perhaps she would not have noticed the odd shape of the windows and the bannisters,

Digitized by Google

or the beautiful panelling in the passage, if she had not been told about them, but now it was the only place in London where she wanted to live. Frieda, on the contrary, could see it only in the light of what she must pay, and grasping her umbrella in one hand and her bag in the other—for she would not as much as put down her things till she knew what arrangements had been come to—she stood arguing with the landlady as to the possibility of lowering the price. Crookby's niece was a youngish woman in a neat print dress, very inferior to her uncle in speech and education; but however inaccurate her grammar, she had a flow of language at her command that silenced even Frieda in the end. During the discussion Blanche stood near without saying a word, gradually being emptied of all her excitement. Even when Frieda put down her umbrella and handbag as a sign she would remain, it made no difference; she felt no pleasure. She felt merely uncomfortable before Mrs. Turner that so much fuss had been made over a few shillings.

"We must make the best of the two bedrooms," she said, not looking at Frieda. "Do you really think we could have got a sitting-room somewhere else for the same price?"

"Certainly in Germany would we have one, and no carefully brought up German woman would have charged extra for Mary's bed. This woman is very mercenary. I do not like her."

But by luncheon-time Frieda was resigned, even pleased with having come. Her character showed another side after she left the convent, and a suspiciousness, a prying practicality, which at the convent had not been in evidence, came up as soon as she was out in the world. She took a passionate interest in every detail. At the convent she had rarely spoken of the food, except to say it was bad, but at luncheon she told Blanche how the dishes had been cooked, how they ought to have been cooked, and what could be made out of the remains, and confided her determination to go down to the kitchen directly she knew Mrs. Turner well enough. Blanche listened with

Digitized by Google

an air of surprise, and went back to her own bedroom at the earliest opportunity.

She had arranged her possessions to look as nearly as possible like her room at the convent, and she felt, in these new surroundings, less strange than she had expected. She had expected strangeness, but in the first hour of knowing she was to live in the house behind Crookby's she had expected, as well, something that was new, something wonderful. And now, the very day after her arrival, she found herself with nothing to do. What would she have done that afternoon if she had stayed on at the convent? Perhaps nothing very special, but at the convent one had the feeling there was always something to be done. After luncheon at Mrs. Turner's she sat with idle hands, longing for some engagement that would make it necessary to get up, put on her hat, and go out, even though the weather was darkening for rain. She had no engagement. Everything had stopped for the moment. Her elocution teacher had announced he was ill, and she knew he was considering whether he would not give up the class, which had never been a success. The old lady to whom she read aloud had gone to the country for Easter, and had not come back. Cintra, too, was out of town, and she could think of no one else upon whom she wanted to call. George was busy, and was not coming to see her. Had Father Dudley been well she might have gone to the Oratory; and that reminded her that she now lived so far away from the Oratory that it would mean almost a journey to get there. She would have to attend the Church of Corpus Christi in Maiden Lane, or she might go to the Marist Fathers in Leicester Place; but no one could ever take Father Dudley's place with her. It had been a terrible disappointment that he was too ill to hear her confession on Good Friday, and the convent confessor, the Jesuit, had not seemed to understand her. She wondered if she would have felt happier on Easter Day had she been prepared for her Communion by Father Dudley. . . . Her thoughts seemed to pause for a few moments, and, as though the idea had never been absent from her mind,

Digitized by Google

she wondered how she could let Julian know she had followed his advice and come to Crookby's. She looked at her watch, and saw with a sinking of the heart that it was only three o'clock. Time had never seemed so long. She opened first one book and then another; she tried a little pious reading, but her mind was afield. Sewing was her best resource, for then she could let her thoughts take her where they wished. The thought that Julian had been in chapel with her on Palm Sunday was still able to occupy her—the memory still had the power to pierce her as sharply as a sword. It made her suddenly wince with joy again, and her hands dropped over the mending she had picked up. That prayer had been answered! During her retreat the memory of how it had been answered had brought her to an ecstacy of pleading for him, and then in the reactions from that intensity there had come long, exhausted moments of extraordinary peace, in which she had felt herself floating, and had almost forgotten where she was—like the moment in chapel after she had drawn him with her to the very feet of God, when she had seemed to become disembodied, and all that was physical had seemed to dissolve into nothingness and cease. . . .

But praying for him was no longer quite enough; she wanted to see him again, in order to say the things that she had left unsaid, and the happiness she had felt over this first step gained towards her object—bringing him back to the Church—was made insufficient by her straining to go further.

If he called at the convent they would tell him where she had gone. He would be surprised. But when he came to Mrs. Turner's, where could one receive him? As that occurred to her she put down her sewing, quickly got up, and opened the door. She saw the somewhat insecure-looking landing and the square-paned window, and then, with a sudden hope there might be a letter for her, she went downstairs. There were no letters, nor was anyone about, and all the doors were closed. Noticing two on the ground-floor she wondered if either of them

Digitized by Google

led to Crookby's shop. She opened one, and was startled at finding the Turners' dining-room, and Mrs. Turner, dressed in black, with a large cameo brooch at her throat, reading the paper at the window under a hanging bird-cage.

"Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Benwell?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I was wondering if one could get to Crookby's shop from the house. I was told one could."

"It's the other door on the ground-floor. You can't miss it," answered the landlady; and Blanche retreated.

With a little sense of adventure she tried the door Mrs. Turner had indicated, and she found herself in the covered-in passage of which Julian had spoken. To be discovering for herself what he had discovered was delicious, and as she stopped at the little window to look out she felt almost as though they had spoken to each other.

The court that she looked out upon was wonderfully irregular, built up according to the necessities of at least two centuries, and the backs of the houses, jutting out haphazard, met, or avoided each other, with a fine unconcern that produced incomparable results. Coming suddenly upon them reminded her in an instant of her childhood, for it was like stepping through the magic house into another kind of a world. She was *back of the world* again. And this other world was suspended in the unnatural stillness that comes before an evening storm. There was no one moving through the livid air to attach it to reality, no one on the wooden gallery that ran along the width of the opposite house under overhanging eaves, and no one by the pump that stood in the open part of the court, whose flat, smooth paving-stones reflected something of the sinister sky above. It was like an illustration by Cruikshank that Julian had shown her, and for a moment that thrilling quality that belongs to the hardly imaginable and yet historic past, which he had been the first to make her feel, came close to her. Then it passed away, and she continued on her voyage of discovery.

At the end of the passage was a short flight of shallow

Digitized by Google

steps, and then came another door. It yielded to her, and she stepped into Crookby's back shop; and to see the place, from this end, where she and Julian had talked together, deepened that sense, familiar to her childhood, of having *come through*. She stood for a moment, remembering, before going on. But Crookby was not at his desk, and that had never happened before! He was looking for a book on a lower shelf, his hands resting on his knees, and his skull-cap a little askew on his head. When he heard her step he straightened himself and looked at her.

"Mr. Crookby," she hurriedly began, "you must be surprised. I am staying at Mrs. Turner's, and I found my way in here——"

"That's how I find my way every morning," he said, going over to his desk, "and back every evening. It's very easy."

She did not know just what to say after that, and he resumed his seat and put on a pair of spectacles.

"I haven't even my hat on," she murmured, raising her hands to her hair, and she was starting for the inner door when the thought of the bedroom she must return to made her hesitate.

"Mr. Crookby," she said, coming back into the front shop, "I might get a book from you. I have nothing to do."

"Perhaps you would like to get a book for about four shillings or so," he replied, moistening his forefinger to turn over a leaf. "Or would you give more? That is what a lady asked for the other day—'A little book for about four shillings.'"

"But how could she?" asked Blanche.

He did not answer.

"You do not seem to want to sell your books," she said timidly.

"I want to read them all," answered Crookby, "and so I don't want any of them to go."

"Read them all! But even if you had time for that, could you, or anyone I mean—understand them all?"

Digitized by Google

"How do we ever know we understand anything? We think what we think, but we never know if that is what we were meant to think."

"I suppose that is true," she said, "but . . ."

He turned over another page, and in a sudden access of shyness, being also half-frightened by his excessive ugliness, she retreated again.

Besides the ladder, which she remembered, there was a single step that could be used as a seat, and she sat down, resting her back against the crowded book-shelves. It did not seem possible that she should really be at home here. The storm had come, the rain was beating against the little window, and inside the smell of dust and book-leather made it difficult to breathe. But it seemed as though it were too strange to be true to be at home here. It seemed as though it must be another life than hers.

The last few weeks at the convent, her talk with Reverend Mother only the day before—it was all so lost in the past that she could hardly remember it. And now there were no boarders, no sisters to see who came and went. She could receive her visitors without fear of causing a scandal among those good people who were so quick to misunderstand. She was her own mistress! Her mind seemed to reel with pleasure, and she had to shut her eyes. When she opened them again she was wondering if, before Julian came, she had not better get a chair and bring it in here, for it was here that she would see him. When they had come before he had leaned against the ladder over there. . . . She sprang to her feet, hardly aware of what she was doing, involuntarily impelled to action; and when, half-way across the floor, she noticed where she was going, it seemed natural that she should be hurrying back to the house. Without saying a word to Crookby she slipped away through the little door in the corner, going quickly, as if these visions, unknown to her life until then, were driving her before them with a strange authority.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XV

BEHIND the maidservant who opened the door was a quaint little girl in a short dress, with her dark hair pinned up, who looked him over from head to foot.

"I will see if Mrs. Benwell is in," said the servant, and the little girl came forward with an air of authority.

"I know my aunt is in," she said to Julian, as the maid, having closed the door, turned to go upstairs. "Do you want to see her?"

"That is why I asked for her," answered Julian, looking down at her from his greatly superior height.

She reddened at that.

"My aunt receives her visitors in the book-shop, because she hasn't a sitting-room yet. But she is going to have one. But at the convent there were two parlours. No, three. There were three parlours. Perhaps you saw them all."

"Perhaps I may have, but I was thinking of other things. When you, too, have people come to see you they will not notice in what room they are sitting."

"I haven't any visitors of my own," she said. "Mr. Carfrae said he came to see me, but I didn't believe it."

Julian was as attentive as he would have been in any drawing-room.

"But you must try to believe what people tell you, for though it isn't wise it is so much more interesting!"

"I didn't believe him," she repeated, "though I thought it might be true."

"I think you and I could be great friends," said Julian, continuing to look earnestly down at her, and with the little air he could assume of making a surprising confidence, "for I think we feel things in very much the same

Digitized by Google

way. We have the same imbecile and ludicrous optimism, which Fate will never cease to mock. I am sure we could be friends."

She drew back a step, and then he saw that his manner, though he had meant it otherwise, had broken down her self-importance, and that suddenly on the point of tears she was meeting him defiantly.

"We—we wouldn't be friends, I don't think, because —my aunt put up my hair because I was so hot. I don't always wear it this way, you know."

"I only know it looks very well," answered Julian, less ceremoniously, and much more kindly. "And so your aunt put it up for you?"

He looked at the small head, round which two braids of dark hair had been tightly pinned, and he thought of Blanche's fingers braiding and pinning. The little squarely shaped face had possessed from the first a most remarkable interest for him.

"Have you been here long?" he asked.

"I came last Wednesday. Oh, here is Maria! Her whole name is Maria Lavinia Bates. She would tell you if you asked her."

"Mrs. Benwell won't be many minutes now," said the servant, trying to look unconscious of the last remark. "She says Miss Mary can show you the way to Mr. Crookby's, if you'll wait for her there."

"I can show you," said Mary. "I have been twice to the shop already. This is the door. Do you hear Mrs. Turner's canary? He sings so loud sometimes she has to put a dark cover over his cage."

In the passage he stopped to look through the little window at the wooden gallery opposite, and the piling-up of eighteenth-century roofs. He thought he had never been so happy. Mary ran ahead, jumped the flight of steps down to Crookby's door in a bound, and burst into the shop. Julian followed more slowly. The back shop was cut in two by a shaft of sunlight like a golden roadway, and he was dazzled for a second. It was like crossing the area of an enchantment to pass through it.

Digitized by Google

Crookby at the desk showed no surprise at his appearance.

"This is a curious entrance for a customer to make, Crookby," said Julian.

"Always welcome, Mr. Eames. As a customer or not."

"Then you know I have come for another reason than for books to-day?"

"If you tell me so," answered Crookby.

The malicious twist of his face disconcerted Julian, who did not reply. He wondered what the bookseller was thinking, and then he turned round to see why Mary was so silent, and found she was gone. He knew that instead of putting her at her ease with him he had made her uncomfortable, and he was sorry, for he liked children, and they were usually attracted to him. He stood looking into the inner room, seeing the door in the corner through that shaft of sun-motes, and feeling the centre of his emotion in his throat. When he saw the door opening his heart seemed to grow weak, and for a moment he could not move.

She came in radiantly, and as he went to meet her she looked at him without a word. She never greeted him at all.

"It is you," said Julian. "It seems a miracle."

She had so absorbed an expression he doubted at first whether she even heard.

"You seem different, as if you had been born again here, after leaving the convent. I, too, am as if born again! We are two new people here to-day."

"Why do I feel that way? I, too, feel a little different——" She was looking at him still. "Perhaps it is the spring. I thought this morning how beautiful——"

"At the convent I couldn't see the sun shine on you as it is doing now. I don't think I have ever seen you in sunlight before. I could feel as I look at you that I have never seen sunlight in my whole life. It has been spent in darkness until now."

They were still standing; it had not occurred to them to sit down. She answered:

Digitized by Google

"I feel it is a dream that I have left the convent."

"It is a divine adventure."

"Didn't it surprise you I had come here? I had no choice. I had to leave at a moment's notice, and I thought of the old house you had told me about. It seemed as though I had been meant to come here."

"Isn't it extraordinary? I remember the first time I came into this shop. I had a feeling that I had seen it before; I could not imagine why. I met you here, and now you are living here. . . . It seems as though this place had always been meant for us."

"Old Crookby——" she began.

It was a shock to have to remember there was someone near, and he turned to see if they were visible to the corner where old Crookby was sitting. As he turned away Blanche laughed a little. She had not known what she was going to say. Julian's eyes met hers again. Hers never left him, but he had started to bring her a chair, and they did not come nearer each other. She preferred the low step where she had sat that other afternoon, and he drew the chair, which she had secretly brought down from the house the day before, towards him, and leaned one knee upon it.

"Crookby seemed such a strange old man to me once," she said, making a great effort, and suddenly unable to raise her eyes. "Now I know he isn't really strange. Mrs. Turner's son keeps the accounts straight, and takes care of the shop while Crookby rests in the middle of the day. He doesn't make any money, Mrs. Turner says."

"I would rather not know he ever ate or rested at all. I want him to be a sort of wizard, an astrologer, at this moment reading our fate in the stars. Everything must be extraordinary to-day, because it is so extraordinary you and I should be here."

"Have you been in town all the time since I saw you?"

"Of course not, or I would have come to see you before. I was called out of town during Easter week by my mother's illness. She is out of danger, but for a few days we did not think she could live."

Digitized by Google

Blanche cried: "How dreadful—how dreadful! And I did not know it!" And Julian was checked for a second. He had not expected her to show this concern over his mother's illness, because he had been able to feel so little himself.

"I wish I had known! It seems so terrible that this should have been happening to you——" "And I not know of it," she was going to say, but she stopped. She was being borne along on a stream which she did not think to explain. Her words rushed into being with the rushing of her blood, and if she did not speak them all it was because her breath failed her too much.

"But we are not anxious about her now. . . . There is so much I want to ask you! I feel there will never be enough time. Why is it that at the convent I didn't feel stifled? I feel now as if we had escaped from a prison."

"You mustn't say that—you mustn't say that!" she repeated, trying to understand what he meant.

"There was something I wanted to ask! . . . Did you give up your elocution lessons about a month ago? I went to meet you one morning, and you weren't there."

"Our teacher fell ill, but I wasn't sorry the class was given up. I don't know why. I was tired and discouraged. I couldn't make myself do anything, hardly go out of the house."

"I went to the house, and yet I didn't find you; and I had an idea you had given orders not to let me in."

She flushed deeply. "But how could you think that?"

"I want to know, and it is true, after all! I felt it . . . and now you must tell me. Was it because you never forgave me for what I did that afternoon?"

"What did you ever do that I couldn't forgive? It was for another reason, but I don't feel I ought to tell you."

He did not beg, he did not even speak, but in his silence he was so compelling that she knew she would have to give in. And there were certain things she had wanted to say to him, and while she tried to remember she forgot what he was waiting for her to say. But his silence, his presence, drew her back again, and she knew she must

Digitized by Google

tell him all about Father Dudley. It was just as well. Speaking of Father Dudley might bring her closer to what she had prayed she might say, and that now evaded her. . . .

"In my confession I mentioned you. I asked Father Dudley if it were right to see you, and he advised me not to see anyone who was not connected with my profession for at least a fortnight. That is the story. That is all there is to it," she said, lifting her eyes to him.

He said nothing at first. He could not believe that so much happiness should be his.

"How did you mention me? What made you speak of me?"

"I speak of everyone I meet. And then in all these years no man had ever called on me, till suddenly I had three visitors who came often to see me. I had to speak of them to Father Dudley."

It was now such an effort to talk at all that her voice trailed on her last words, and she ended faintly. She wanted to be silent. Her giddiness was almost like a desire to sleep.

"Why could you see the other two, and not me? Was it only I you were forbidden to see?"

"The others were connected with the play, with my profession, but you were different. I don't know why you were different. All the same, he told me I mustn't see you for a fortnight."

Her hands stirred in her lap, for she came near holding them out to him and entreating him not to force her to speak. Her desire for his conversion, her prayers for him, the ecstasy that had been hers when she imagined she might be the one to save him—all this had glimmered in her mind. But it had brought no conviction with it. She had nothing to say. Her struggle for speech was barren. It was like opening a succession of doors into an empty room. She thought from force of habit, "I will tell him the story of my conversion," but she could not focus upon the necessary words. She sat looking down, and looking away from him, and the great wave

Digitized by Google

of emotion that rose in her was so nameless and strange that she did not know if it were joy she was feeling, or a wild unhappiness.

"Now I have told you," she said. "It was because they were connected with the play. . . . But I did not dare ask if you had called, because even those weeks I was almost afraid of the visitors I was having. No one else had visitors so often. I was becoming a scandal. If I had stayed on, I would have been obliged to ask you not to come to see me at all."

Julian turned away. He glanced through the door towards Crookby, but only instinctively, not really thinking about him.

"What am I saying? I think it is true," she murmured.

"When I think what might have happened I am terrified. Why should this have happened? Why should you be here? You might have hidden yourself, and though I would always have found you, this is so much better. This is so much better," he repeated, looking around the little enclosure.

The glittering sun-motes had turned to dust again, and in the sombre air the deep colours of the books, their tumbled row upon row, were beginning to darken. He looked at Blanche, and while her hair became dazzling and hazy to him, he could hardly see her face; but she was absorbing every line of his features—the sweep of his wing-shaped eyebrows and the expression of his mouth—in a fixed and almost trance-like stare.

"Why is it better?" her lips began to say; but at that moment they heard the opening of a door, and the noise of the street swelled in to them.

"Someone has come into the shop!" Julian answered.

The interruption was so terrible he felt it physically.

They waited a moment till they heard a voice—it was a woman's voice—address a question to the bookseller (it did not seem possible that anyone could speak just then in such a cool and unemphatic voice as that), and then Blanche whispered she must go. Before he could under-

Digitized by Google

stand what she meant she was at the door, and he did not keep her. Indeed, he looked after her as she went with a species of curiosity, saying to himself that now he could decide. He did not know what, yet with haste and decision he found his hat and left the shop, looking at the lady who had interrupted them, and whom he had never seen before, curiously and narrowly as he passed.

But out in the street he felt a furious disappointment; so much so, it was as though the current of his blood had been violently reversed. "This can't be—this can't go on! Something must be done," he kept repeating. "Something must happen."

He walked very quickly, analyzing acutely everything that met his eyes, but unable to bring his intellect to bear upon anything he was feeling. He could not understand what he was feeling, and, just as it had happened to him before, it seemed as if he were experiencing emotion for the first time. It was not that he consciously thought so, or minimized all that had happened before, for he did not think or consider. He experienced nothing in a characteristic way, as Julian Eames might have done, or even as Julian Eames. He was merely an instrument for recording sensation.

After a time he paused, and stood for a moment at a corner instead of crossing. The lamps were being lit between the tall houses, and a pale yellow light mingled with the chilly blues and greys of the street. The pavement shone almost white, while at the other end of the scale of colour the sky was a lucid green. Everything seemed extraordinary to him, and suddenly he felt a delicious contentment.

He felt then that, waiting just outside his brain, was a realization so wonderful he could not think of it, and moving in its influence was enough, without coming face to face with any fact. But he looked into faces that he passed as if searching for something, and everything was a revelation. He seemed to be walking on air. Life in all its plentitude was his. This—just this—had never happened to him before.

Digitized by Google

"Do other men feel as violently as I do?" But he did not seem to be thinking of Blanche. There was a splendid exaltation in his blood, and it was driving him onwards. A little farther on the trees of the Park were pale and feathery against a sky streaked with primrose and violet. A crescent-shaped flight of birds was curving westward. There was a peacefulness in the sky, where the day was dying, that escaped him, that he could only dimly feel. His attention was diverted by the carriages that made two streams of traffic in the Mall.

"Enthusiasm and youth! One could tell it was spring in the very trot of the horses."

He had got as far as Victoria Station before a sort of paralysis of mind gave way to impulse and decision. Then he hailed a hansom. He was going back to Blanche, and yet when he opened the gates of thought to the realization that had been waiting outside them, he wasn't flooded with the joy he might have expected. "I can't understand what it means," he said, and he was filled with anxiety.

In the Strand he saw that it was already night, and that some of the shops were beginning to close. "Crookby will be shutting up," he thought, and his heart beat painfully.

The hansom jingled away, and the old houses seemed to be leaning forward in the stillness. Everything was quiet.

"I am always standing on a doorstep, waiting to know if I can see her!"

He heard steps inside the house, and the door opened. Against the dim passage behind her he saw the servant who had let him in once before that day.

"I have something important to say to Mrs. Benwell. Can I see her?"

"I'll go up and tell her you're come back. Will you step inside and wait till she comes down?"

"I can go round to the shop, if that would be more convenient. Has Mr. Crookby come home yet?"

"I expect he'll soon be leaving the shop, but you may just catch him if you go at once."

Digitized by Google

"Then will you tell her I'm waiting for her there?"

He turned the corner into Farawell Street, and saw a boy at that moment taking in the trestle and the books that always stood in the street before Crookby's door. He left the door open, and Julian followed him in. The shutters were already put up, and the front shop was dark, but a gas-jet was burning in the back shop, and there Crookby was standing, with his shoulders hunched up and a skull-cap on his head. The boy, who had dropped his load with a loud clatter, spoke to the old man, and then disappeared into the Turners' house, and Crookby lit a candle in the candlestick he carried and turned out the gas.

Julian's heart was beating so hard he thought Crookby must hear it. With the leisureliness of age, and his own particular and as it were cynical leisureliness, the old man, holding up his candle, came slowly towards him. The sudden shadows that sprang up when the gas was turned out had seemed immeasurably to widen and lengthen the shop, and when Julian recovered himself from a moment in which time seemed to stand still, he might have believed that for an indefinite, an almost infinite period, he had watched Crookby coming towards him down an endless vista of books, while the old man's shadow, contracting and enlarging, moved and capered behind him.

"Mr. Crookby," he said in a loud voice, going to meet him, "do not let me startle you. I am still here."

"I am still at your service, Mr. Eames."

"I have something important to say to Mrs. Benwell, and I wondered if I could have the courtesy of your shop a little longer . . . or shall I go back to Mrs. Turner's?"

"My shop is at your disposal, Mr. Eames, but I would be obliged if you would lock it up when you have finished with it."

He handed Julian the key.

"But—can I really stay here? You don't mind? You prefer to go all the same?"

Digitized by Google

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Nothing."

"Then I had better leave you the key, and ask you to give it to Mrs. Turner when you have done with it."

Julian took it, and the old man bowed to him, and then that interminable watching him go seemed to begin again for Julian. . . . As the old man lowered his candle, his shadow leapt to the ceiling and crouched there a moment, while the candlelight shone over the books, and the old maps, unrolled from a top shelf, displayed strange countries of adventure in red and purple, and dolphins and sea-monsters sporting in uncharted seas.

He put down the candle on the trestle just inside the door, and then went out, leaving Julian alone in the shop.

Julian quickly took the candlestick, held it up, and looked around him. Then he left it on Crookby's desk and crossed the inner room to the door in the corner, opened it, listened, but heard nothing, and came away. "Are you coming? Will you fail me? Will you come?" he thought. He stood beside the desk, listening, and when he imagined he heard the noise of someone coming he began to walk up and down, talking aloud to himself.

"You are coming," he stammered. "How beautiful you are—how beautiful! What a beautiful woman!"

Obeying some transient idea he blew out the candle, and for a moment all was dark. Then he saw the little door in the inner room designed in a thread of light, and on the wall beside it a faint reflection slipped obliquely. Julian stood still, perfectly silent. He heard her on the stairs outside, and the light preceded her when she pushed open the door and came into the shop, holding a candle in her hand. She paused, trying to distinguish him in the shadows.

"What is it?" she said. "What can it be?"

"I had to speak to you, and now you must stay—just for a few minutes. Let me take your candle."

She had stopped by the door, but he took her candlestick as far as Crookby's desk. It never crossed his mind that he might light the gas, even though the dimness seemed to put a terrible unreality between them. She

Digitized by Google

was terribly shadowy to him, and he was afraid of her. She watched him, stretching out her hand.

"Isn't it strange?" he began, trimming the candle. . . . "I knew it when I first saw you," he said, turning to her from the desk. "When I first saw you, I think I passed my hand over my eyes. I had not known anything so beautiful could possibly exist. . . ."

"You must tell me what it is," she whispered, making a groping gesture towards him. "What is it?"

"We love each other!" said Julian, and there was no dram of his blood that did not recognize the avowal.

He seemed to reel with the beauty, and held out his arms to her; and then, before his eyes, he saw her face altering, and instantly all was changed in him again.

"Let me see your face. Let me see you! What is it? What have I done?"

There was the instinct to force her to respond, but the reverence she had always inspired in him triumphed before he knew what it was. He was not able to touch her—and mysteriously and inexplicably, though his arms were round her while they did not close upon her, her sudden cowering before him and her stricken head ceased to represent the same woman to him. Perhaps it was a realization of something irrevocably and fundamentally different between them that overcame his desire. But after that long pause he drew back without a word, and, going over to the farther wall, he leaned heavily against it. After the moment that his blood had made so splendid and loud, a great silence filled his ears, and the air and space about him became vast, and dizzily quiet, and thin.

"I have killed something," he said. "But why should it be like that?"

She began to weep, and as she hid her tears from him he heard the long, suppressed sobs that shook her.

"Yet you must have known!" he said, stung by her grief. "It was so clear from the first. Was it my fault?"

"It was mine—I was blind. I thought I could turn your love to God."

Digitized by Google

"It seems as if God had preferred that you should have it instead," answered Julian brutally.

She gave a cry that awoke all his emotion again.

"But on Palm Sunday, when we went into chapel together, was there not one prayer ?"—and that emotion of his that might have been love turned into a lust of cruelty, while he believed he was inflamed with the desire to do away with all pretences between them.

"Not one single prayer. The reason for everything I have done has been you, and you only. And why must you make a tragedy of it ? To what shadow of a shadow are you sacrificing your precious—our only life ? Can the idea of God be more to you than love ?"

"Let me go ! I want to go !" she said, and with that same groping gesture she felt for the door.

"I've killed something," he repeated, looking after her. "Haven't I ?"

But she did not find the door, and seemed to forget she had been feeling for it. She covered her face with her hands and stood still.

"All the love between us, that was so clear from the first, what did you think it was ? What dreams have you been living in ?" he asked, growing suddenly gentle. He felt his heart would break. "Did you see nothing ? Have you had no smallest experience in all your woman's life ?"

She did not answer.

"What are you thinking of ?" he asked. "Is there no love left for me, now you know that that was love ?"

She answered again by silent weeping, leaning, as he had done, against the book-shelves.

"Why can't I be happy !" exclaimed Julian, full of bitterness. "If life had been a little different we would have been so happy ! If only your mind could be made a little differently !"

The unusual dimness, the unusualness of the place in which they found themselves, and their shadows moving and waiting beside them like curious witnesses—he could not believe it was happening to them.

Digitized by Google

"I won't try to convince you, but you know, don't you, that I have a thousand arguments against your one? Yet your one is too strong! But it was only by a miracle I knew that. I can't imagine why it came to me with such conviction."

He held communion with himself.

"Extraordinary!" he thought. "How clear it all is to me!"

He reached for the candle and held it up, and as the light travelled over that part of the room that had been darkest, he seemed to be seeing more clearly than ever.... And then his insight was blurred by a sensation of suffering and utter loss, and he did not know any longer what he had seen and understood.

"If only there could be a great light in here!" he said. "A great flash of light, such as I have never seen before! If only you had not failed me!"

Their eyes met, or he thought they did, and he peered at her; then he went over to her, and lowered the candle to the level of her face.

"Let me look at you—let me realize what has happened. . . ." But he was shocked to the heart by the spectacle of suffering that he knew then to be infinitely greater than his.

"Blanche, this is a terrible dream. I am going away; I am going to leave you. To leave you is the best action of my life. I have been talking insanely—it was a nightmare. I seem to be understanding for the first time. I must go!" he exclaimed, and in a kind of instinctive and inconsequent hurry he took her hand and held it.

"Always keep yourself from me. I could do you no good." And dropping her hand, filled with the beauty of his renunciation, with a rush of love and tenderness like the unsealing of a flood, he left her, and groped his way to the outer door which he opened, without being aware of how he did it, and closed behind him. He did not know what he was thinking or feeling, or what had been the reason of anything he had done.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVI

A DIP of the downs hid the landscape from sight, and the smooth green slopes rose about them like the walls of a vast amphitheatre. The road continued upwards, scarring the smooth green with chalky ruts, and in that scene of wildness and windyness there seemed a mystery as to where it could be leading. The sky was so near, and the grey clouds, hurried by the wind, travelled so close above their heads, that the air was a more living country than the earth; and it was almost as though there could not be anything beyond the crest of the slope, but as though the clouds must claim the rest. Cintra had tried all her life to express to herself the wildness she felt in this place, and it was so connected with her early recollections that at moments it was touched, as by the shadow of passing wings, with the fugitive spirit of her childhood.

"I have a longing to express," she said to Lovett; "and when I see this I sometimes feel that seeing is not enough, and I keep thinking, 'Here it is, here it is, and what can I do with it!'" The wind, and a sort of wildness in her, too, seemed to carry her onwards, and he hurried as if she were being carried beyond his reach.

"I used to feel it as a child," she said, while the wind strained at her dark green dress. "When we first came to Heddenham, I was almost afraid to come up here; it hurt me; not fear, you understand, but too much feeling."

But she was already moving more slowly beside him, and following the track a little downwards they suddenly passed out of the region of the wind and came into what seemed a circle of stillness. As they threw themselves down on the short grass they were aware of the cuckoo calling from the little wood in the hollow.

Digitized by Google

"This seemed to me, in those days, the country 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon.' It was a country of trolls. I love the North—I've always loved the Northern quality in things, even in the days of fairy-tales. It was always easier for me to see trolls than genii. That is why, when Peer Gynt rode along the tops of the mountains on his reindeer, he reminded me of so much. I knew his country—in the imagination. The—the sort of shivering of pain and excitement there was then——"

"'The incommunicable thrill of things,'" said Lovett, and she never forgot that phrase. The look of expectation that had been in her eyes ever since Lovett had come grew more insistent as she turned to him.

"And now that you say that," he added, "I realize that the back of your house, from the garden, has an expression like the Witch's House in the Wood. I wondered what it reminded me of. . . . Of course, it is that. Those secretive windows, and the fearful cunning of the middle door!"

She laughed, but he was looking away.

"Now, that farm over there—as one sees it against the horizon—is as Saxon as the prose of King Alfred. It is like the names in his 'Voyage of Wolfstan.' But now I can only remember the Danish names. 'Weonothland lay on the starboard, and on the larboard lay Langaland, and Laeland, and Falster, and Sconeg. And all this land belongeth to the Danes.'"

The lines of the low thatched barns, while as straight and simple as a first lesson in perspective drawing, fitted the curve of the hill as though they had come there like the rocks and the grass, and the loneliness of the little house, beaten upon by the wind, and of the yard, was akin to the solitude of the upland road.

"And in years I have never seen anyone there, only the dogs. At least, I feel I ought never to have seen anyone!"

"But those sheep, do they belong to the picture?" he asked, pointing to the flock that had gradually moved up the hill, as if unaware of them, while to the tinkling

Digitized by Google

of the bells and the bleating of lambs was added the steady, blunt sound of the grass being cropped short. As Cintra and Lovett watched it seemed appropriate that a flight of crows should suddenly alight, some on the grass and some on the backs of the sheep, with a balancing of sinister wings.

"They have come straight out of a ballad," said Lovett; and as though something had startled them they rose, croaking loudly, and with a heavy beating of wings flew up into the turbulent air. The sheep turned, and in a steady phalanx moved along the slope and away, with the dogs sniffing behind them.

The sky shone behind the clouds, and the wind seemed to be spreading abroad the brightness of it. The air was moist, and there was moisture in the young green of the little wood in the hollow, in the darker green of a line of trees along the further hilltop, and the ochre colour of a strip of sown field. And in the wind, and the moisture and brightness, there was something rejuvenating and buoyant, something magnificent and strong.

Some realization of it was with Cintra, but the realization of her own life was dominant. She seemed to be walking in some secret place, and not to know where she might find herself was the charm of that intermediate hour. As is often the case with people whose future is ready to declare itself, she did not think of the future at all. It would have seemed a kind of indelicacy to look into the future. The unfolding of the present was all that she needed to see.

Lovett had gone abroad for a few weeks at Easter, and during his absence she had left London and had come to Heddenham, where she had a house. Most of her childhood had been spent at Heddenham, with her father, and now that he was dead the spot was all the dearer to her. And as the house belonged to her and not to Mrs. Fleming, she was mistress here and Mrs. Fleming was guest, a readjustment of their relations that went far to make her happy in the place. When Lovett wrote to ask if he could come down and see her she did not have to get her

Digitized by Google

great-aunt's permission to invite him; but as Mrs. Fleming had put the trained nurse, whose services she said she needed, in the only available spare room, she made it just as impossible for Cintra to invite him as if, in London, she had forbidden it. He put up, therefore, at the inn; but Cintra felt at liberty to see him whenever she chose.

He had arrived the previous afternoon, and from the first moment of seeing him again she had looked at him expectantly, while always aware of analyzing him closely. With him, with what he was, with what he said, lay some secret of the future, and she looked at him, wondering what the secret could be. His attitude to herself did not occupy her. He had said nothing to show that a change had taken place in him as it had in her, yet she did not doubt that it had. She wished she could understand herself as well as she understood him, and it was to try and understand herself that she looked at him.

His aquiline face, his pleasant, irregular teeth, his hazel eyes and the way one eyebrow rose a little higher than the other when he smiled—what did it mean to her? And why was she not satisfied with what she saw and heard? Why did she want to convince herself that in every way he was extraordinary? She wanted other people, too, to think him extraordinary. And was this mere vanity, or was it that she wanted life and experience on a grand, on a heroic, scale, and that nothing else could satisfy her? Yet when she thought his capacities might not be heroic she was filled with an extraordinary disappointment. She wanted them to be; she wanted him to satisfy all her requirements.

The evening before, for instance. . . . When he and her great-aunt had met she had been conscious that she wanted him to make a great impression on Mrs. Fleming, that she wanted him to make an even greater impression on other people than he had made upon herself. This desire was so strong that she had been disappointed by the meeting, when it had been foolish to expect anything. Mrs. Fleming was a formidable old lady, with small, light

Digitized by Google

fawn-coloured eyes, and pupils dilated like an eagle's—an old woman who, without being bad, had the faculty of withering everything before her. Her unblinking eye, her slight smile of amusement—she was never contemptuous, or made even impatient, but always diverted by the absurdities she saw in everyone—could reduce everything around her to a frozen flatness in which she easily appeared a victor, for she alone was left smiling and untouched. How could she be impressed by anyone? When she at last went upstairs the hour had flown only too quickly. They had decided to take turns to read aloud to each other, but had not been able to agree on any book, and this had afforded them an apparently endless opportunity for enjoyment. She smiled to remember it, but he interrupted her by springing up and telling her to come on. They ran down the rest of the slope together, and up the opposite one, and the wind caught them again and hurried them onwards, in the same onward movement as the clouds that she had felt were flying towards the Unknown. She felt the buoyancy of the day, and was suddenly thrilled by the knowledge of her youth. She realized the spring in the air when the persistent note of the cuckoo was borne to her on the wind.

She seemed, that day, to grow happier with every hour; everything they thought of doing seemed delightful. And after he had left her at the gate, as she went in, she thought over the things he had said, and a feeling of pride came over her.

"How amusing he is! What unexpected things he can say!" and she remembered what he had said when he had first seen her house, which was at the top of the village street, standing a little back behind a row of Scotch firs. One of these trees, the one flanking the gate, could be seen asprawl against the sky as one came up the street, and when he had caught sight of the tossing branches he had exclaimed: "Oh, what a haggard tree that is! What a desperate fellow!"

It was like him to say that; it was like his irresponsible humour to say he felt about certain places that they were

Digitized by Google

created only for the moment, and that he knew when he was gone they disappeared because they had never really existed. She thought she had felt that herself, but as he elaborated his amusing theories she was glad it was he who knew best how to do so. She wanted to admire him more than she wanted to be admired. And she looked at him so expectantly because, without fully recognizing it, she wanted to see herself justified in letting him take possession of her mind, which she had never been taught really to possess for herself.

Her little stone house, very old in parts, with a flagged roof, leaded windows, and an arched front-door, wore, in the shadow of the trees, as he said, something of an air of secrecy. A high box-hedge extended away from it on either side. As she went up the short walk she wished that Lovett could see it in summer-time, when tall white lilies grew between the firs.

The square hall was always rather dark, panelled waist-high in dark oak, and half-concealing in its corners two black lacquer cabinets; a few prints hung on the walls, and a mirror in an old black frame picked with gold hung over the fireplace. It was more of a room than a hall, for the little steep oak staircase was shut away in a recess. But the smaller room beyond, one step lower than the level of the hall, was cheerful and intimate. Outside the window hung the parrot's wicker cage, and the clever-looking bird, grey with a vermilion head, muttered to itself in the evening quiet.

She glanced at herself in the mirror as she passed to see how she had been looking, and, still feeling the stimulus of his company, her solitude was interesting to her; it was almost as though she were being observed. She arranged her room as though it were about to receive a visitor, and then she reminded herself that he was not coming that evening; and at once the interest departed. At one moment she felt she must send for him; she must have him at all costs. . . . The idea of the rest of the summer after he had gone, the winter ahead of that, hung about the edge of her consciousness, but she tried not to

Digitized by Google

think of it, for a heavy melancholy threatened to descend upon her. She sat down on the broad window-seat and looked out, following the line of the hedge with her eyes, aware that she did not understand the object of her life—that the enigma of her existence seemed dark whenever she looked beyond the present. She had always felt that one needed an object to live, and she wondered if many people were sure that they possessed an object. Was she more objectless than most people? But as she wondered she felt the presence of another kind of enigma; she seemed again to be standing in a secret place, of which she knew little, in whose silence she had to hold her thoughts in check. An extraordinary feeling of timidity was reflected in her face; her expression grew simple and humble. "How good he is!" she thought. . . . In another moment she was thinking of his life, and the simplicity of her expression changed; she suddenly became intent. He was not going back to America, for which she was glad, but he might have to go to China for a year. She pondered over this. She was no longer so convinced of the lack of brilliancy in his career, and his prospects, that of a rather small but mellow property and house in Scotland, had become even attractive. He was altogether a different man to the one she had first met. At first there had been too grasping a spirit in her interest in his prospects, but now she was adjusting herself, more or less, to reality, and revealing a fundamental instinct which she shared with the bird about to build its nest and the beaver its dam.

Next day their talk renewed itself still more imperatively, again and again came up to the edge of true expression, and then by a chance word was turned aside. She was interested, she was delighted; the day passed like an hour. But as the time approached when she was expected home again the postponement of what she was awaiting seemed to weigh like a burden. She was not sure what she wished of the future, but she did not wish any possibilities to be left so vague; she did not want to feel there were fair prospects that were unattainable by

Digitized by Google

her. She lagged as they walked home through the lanes; she could not speak she was so conscious of his well-grown, loosely built frame, of his shoulder, his arm in a rough sleeve, that, putting out her hand, she could have touched. . . . She stopped at last, for it was as though a voice urged within her: "Let it be now!"

He went on a few steps, looked over the lowland that was stretched before them, and remained a few moments in contemplation. She waited for him to speak; when he did he was as unexpected as ever.

"The Jews had it that there were two twilights," he said. "The first they called the Dove's Twilight; the second the Raven's. This must be the Dove's Twilight."

"Yes, yes," she answered joyously, while a new confidence pervaded her entirely. She could not have explained how it was, but she knew by his voice that everything was beautiful. If they had kissed each other, it could not have been a more exquisite moment; and in postponing that of which she was sure she seemed to be prolonging something even more perfect.

Nothing was left of the sunset but a few bars of purple cloud, lying low on the horizon, just above the marshes that were still flooded with the winter's rains. All day the water had reflected a mildly sunless sky, and now, framed in dark ridges of trees, it shone like silver in the pearl-coloured air. The wooded distance, on one hand, was veiled with a little mist, and on the other the majestic, unbroken sweep of the downs seemed to recede into the pallid wake of the sunset. At their feet the roofs of Heddenham showed between elm-trees, and they heard the swallows screaming, and saw them circling about the eaves of the barns.

"The Dove's Twilight!" she thought to herself. It was so pale and magical it was as though she saw everything—the roofs, the trees, and the sky—through a milky crystal, in which everything was clear, but everything was remote, removed into another kind of air. It did not seem to be real, but to be an illusion of the individual

Digitized by Google

eye. She thought that at any moment the film might tear across and float away. . . .

The swallows were no longer crying; in the field they heard only the ceaseless moving of the wind in the elm-trees. They paused again to look at each other, and it was as if she had never seen his features before. But the mystery was too great, and they went on without having spoken.

They passed through a gate into the village street, and the low, thatched roofs folded them in on either side. There was a reserve about those shapes that seemed to withdraw from distinction, to be content with a simplicity that was as harmonious as the rising and falling of waves. Here and there the gentle lines crowded together more densely, and there were sudden groupings in the pale, open spaces. A few windows were lit, affording glimpses of cottage rooms, such as a candle standing on a dresser, a spread table, or a shadow flung upon a ceiling. Once or twice a delicate tracery of leaves and geranium flowers was designed upon a close-drawn curtain. And a luminous sky, white like the inside of a shell, hung over the top of the street.

They saw at last the desperate fir-tree at her gate, and in a few minutes the gate had shut and he was walking away. His footsteps died on the road while, with her arms folded on the top bar, she listened intently.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVII

THE next morning she came into the corner room, where he had previously been ushered, holding a telegram in her hand. "This came last night," she said, and, though she tried, she was unable to repress the note of consternation in her voice. "It is from Blanche Benwell—from Mrs. Benwell. She wanted to know if I could put her up. She wants to stay here for a few days—in fact, she said if I could have her she would arrive to-day."

She waited, not knowing exactly what she expected—expecting, perhaps, an instant response, an exclamation of horror even. His expression froze, and he merely asked:

"She must be a great friend of yours to propose herself like this?"

"I've known her several years."

"She's stayed here before?"

"Yes."

"And you've already answered this?"

"I sent it off this morning. I told her to come."

"Of course."

He was standing before the fireplace in his riding-breeches, straddling his legs a little, and, as it seemed to Cintra, coolly and crisply asking questions. His very attitude was unfortunate, suggesting as it did the hunting type of young man, and reminding her of certain sporting men of the neighbourhood whom she disliked, who seemed as alien to herself as another species. In her nervous and expectant mood reactions were quick; her temper was always impulsive. And immediately she decided that the evening before had been an illusion, and that this morning sunshine, this cool crispness, this business-like atmosphere, this was reality. . . . A whole world rolled

Digitized by Google

between this and the previous evening, and her consternation was dominated by a rush of anger. If he took the news like this, if this intrusion upon their solitude meant so little to him, she could show him that it meant nothing to her. She did not sit down, but leaning against the jamb of the door, she affected a languid indifference.

"I have always told Blanche to propose herself whenever she wished; she has often come. I am glad she is coming to-day, for I have always wanted you to know her."

Lovett bowed. Having asked her permission with a a look, he was lighting a cigarette.

"Another piece of good news is that Mrs. Fleming has decided to leave us. Now that Blanche will be here to keep me company, my aunt is going to take the opportunity to go up to town for a few days. She hates Heddenham. Whenever she's ill she blames it on the damp. We will have a delightful party without her."

"When does Mrs. Benwell arrive?"

"This afternoon, at tea-time. Will you be back from Brampton?"

He was lunching at a place some six miles away, and she was lending him a horse to ride over. They had been going to ride together till it was time for him to start for Brampton, but, led away by disappointment, pricked into the sorry state of wishing to make matters as bad as she could as long as they had started to go awry, she was prompted to add: "I am so sorry I won't be able to ride this morning. I must help Mrs. Fleming off, and arrange for Blanche's arrival. I won't have time."

It made him start. She saw it.

"That would really be more than I could bear! Isn't sending me away this afternoon enough? Are you going to take away my morning too?"

"Sending you away this afternoon! Why that?"

"Isn't Mrs. Benwell coming?"

"That isn't driving you away, surely!"

"I am not so sure. Come for a ride, and we will discuss it on the Downs."

Digitized by Google

Even as she answered she could not understand herself. She was not usually perverse, but because this matter touched her so nearly she felt impelled to disclaim it. Nothing could appease her disappointment, and that seemed to make her wish to hurt herself the more.

"I really haven't time. It is really impossible. I ought to go up now."

"Does that mean you are suggesting I should leave at once?"

There had always been something brilliant in his smile. His eyes were brilliant, their glance observant and judicial. She looked into them sombrely, and felt within herself the strength to resist all that she desired.

"Well, I'll go by myself; I am told that there is something inspiring in solitude, and there will always be the interest of coming back and telling you if I found it so to-day."

He was smiling, but he approached her to say good-bye. Then his smile was suddenly gone, and his sudden change of expression was so stern that instantly she felt weak before it. She could not have stirred.

"I will be back before Mrs. Benwell arrives," she heard him say; and when he had gone she put up her hand—futilely, as if wondering what was beating so hard. She knew now that she had been right the evening before; nothing could avert what was coming. She moved forward, and the smell of his cigarette in the room kept her weak with excitement.

The trained nurse's effects still claimed the larger spare-room, and Cintra decided not to wait for her departure, but to prepare the other room for Blanche without further delay. It could be reached only through her own bedroom, and had no access to the landing, and when it was occupied the lack of privacy that this entailed was sometimes disagreeable to her. But she did not think of this as she spread fresh muslin covers on the chest of drawers and dressing-table, and smoothed the lace cover on the bed. She knew that Blanche's visit was the cause of all her trouble, and a hot resentment at having had this

Digitized by Google

visit thrust upon her smouldered in her heart. Yet, in another way, the visit seemed remote. She could not imagine it, for the thought of Lovett's return from Brampton stood between her and any other continued anticipation. Only once did she stop, and ask herself in dismay what she was going to do to entertain her guest. Mrs. Benwell had stayed at Heddenham before, but Cintra could not remember what they had done together on those occasions. And now it would have been easier to meet a stranger than to meet Blanche, during the past winter they had drifted so far apart from each other. The fascination that Blanche's beauty, and what had seemed at first her intangible personality, as well as her unexplained divorce, and her subsequent life in a convent—the fascination all this had held for Cintra in the early days of the acquaintance, was altogether gone.

The hours till half-past three went slowly, and then the last half-hour to four o'clock galloped all too fast. Cintra dreaded to see Lovett appear before Mrs. Fleming had left, and she hurried the departure in an extreme and ill-concealed impatience. While listening for the sound of his horse's hoofs it seemed to her that Mrs. Fleming would never get off; and at the last moment the nurse ran back for her umbrella. But when the carriage had driven away, and as soon as quiet settled over the house, she began to be afraid he would not get back before the carriage returned with Blanche. The waiting for him seemed eternal. She sat on the window-seat of the hall, watching the road, and in the excess of her impatience as the precious minutes went by she folded her hands in her lap. When at last she heard him on the road she could scarcely believe her ears. But it was he. She saw him dismount at the gate; Fox ran out from the stable to take the horse, and Lovett came up the flagged path, walking quickly, and looking healthy and vigorous.

"They told me there was a shorter way home," he said, "which I unfortunately took, or tried to take, and therefore lost myself. Mrs. Benwell has not come yet, has she?"

Digitized by Google

"She will be here very soon."

"I am not in luck to-day."

She moved away a few steps, and asked him:

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Not force it. I am superstitious—I never force my luck when it is going against me. There's no use trying to beat the cards."

"Does that mean—to continue the gambling metaphor—that you are getting up from the table?"

"Only for the evening. You may be sure that I will try my luck another time. I feel I'd lose if I went on trying now."

She laughed, and he went on, still lightly:

"I am going away this evening because, though Mrs. Benwell is very beautiful and interesting, I don't feel she is able to add to my pleasure here in the very smallest degree. I will come back when she is gone. Directly I heard about her my luck began to change——"

This time she could not quite manage to laugh, but was able to say, fairly evenly: "You're not showing a very sporting instinct, are you?"

"Perhaps not. I'd rather be a live man than a dead sportsman, if you gather my meaning."

She was determined not to let him see what a check she had received; the sense of his vitality, the recollection of his gay and vigorous look, seemed to increase her disappointment. But she spoke, in spite of all her resolution.

"Aren't you afraid that, when you are ready—and willing—to try your chance again, you may find there's nobody left who is willing to play with you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

When she did not answer, he folded his arms.

"We'll drop the metaphor, which isn't a very satisfactory one. In real life, if things are serious, and mean anything—if they're worth having—they last. They don't change in a night."

"I wonder!" she said.

For a second she went far into her own life, and was

Digitized by Google

utterly alone. Then, all of a sudden, the room seemed to be drawing them together, and it thrilled her so much she did not heed what he said. He was speaking; but in the midst, interrupting his voice, there came the sound of wheels at the gate.

"Is it she? Is it she?" she exclaimed. She heard voices, and with a great effort she forced herself to go forward.

"How nice of you to come like this! I always begged you to do it. I am so glad you could—it is so delightful——"

She began too hurriedly, before anyone was well in the room, and when Blanche entered, in her grey dress and little travelling hat, that exaggerated cordiality died into a murmur.

"Dear Blanche!" she said mechanically, going up to her and taking her hand.

She met with no response, and this threw her into confusion, as she had expected to be shown far more affection than she herself could feel. She was still more taken aback when a tall man followed Blanche into the house; she could not remember his name or where she had known him.

"I am George Carfrae," he said, when she hesitated. "I met Mrs. Benwell at Victoria Station, and as I am taking a holiday, and it does not much matter where I go, I got into the train with her. If there isn't an inn near here I will go on to Fulton to-night."

Cintra gave a start when he had finished speaking, though apparently she had been attentively listening. She glanced at Blanche. Mrs. Benwell was standing, looking at Carfrae, but as if she felt Cintra's glance she answered it with a sudden little smile.

"I can put you all up—I insist on putting you up, Mr. Carfrae; you can't get to Fulton to-night. Do you know Mr. Lovett? Blanche, my aunt has only just left—a few minutes ago, and was so sorry to miss you. She sent you her regards. . . . She was called to London.

Digitized by Google

Shall we go into the next room? Tea will soon be ready . . ."

She pulled herself up, thinking her nervousness must be patent to them all, and trying to be quieter she slipped her hand through Mrs. Benwell's arm.

"You must sit here, beside me, and tell me what you have been doing."

It was difficult to speak at all, because, not having wanted Blanche to come to Heddenham, she felt now that Blanche must know it. Mrs. Benwell's manner had suddenly suggested nervous and unreasonable fears that for a moment pushed into the background of her mind her other heavy dismay; had Blanche heard, had anyone told her, did anyone know? Blanche had never been ready of speech, but she had never before been inflexible and cold, and Cintra had never thought to meet so little recognition of a caress. Blanche sat forward in her chair, slightly turned towards her hostess, but it seemed unnatural that she should meet Cintra's gaze with a repetition of that sudden, that oddly automatic, smile. There was then a kind of flickering over her face, as though the muscles had twitched, before she looked away.

"Mrs. Benwell has been rather run down in health lately," said Carfrae, and at any other time the intimacy of his thus speaking for her would have surprised Cintra. "I am glad she has come here, for you are sure to do her good."

"It is so kind of you to have me," added Blanche; and then there was a pause as if no one had expected her to speak.

"You have a wonderful house, Miss Ellison; it has a very subtle look in contrast to the placidity of the other cottages."

"You see, Mr. Carfrae agrees with me," said Lovett, "I told Miss Ellison that there was a fearful secretiveness about the shape of her windows and doors. As you say, her house seems very subtle among the other cottages—like a strange experience in a very simple life."

But Cintra was always aware of Blanche. Again she

Digitized by Google

glanced furtively at her, and again she was aware of that surface flickering on the fixity of Blanche's face and of the trembling in her eyes. The strange impression she had of Blanche seemed to make everything else even more painful and difficult.

After tea Carfrae got up, and almost at once Lovett followed his example.

"You have given up the idea of a hedge for the night, haven't you, Mr. Carfrae? And yet you won't stay with us here! That is very unkind——"

"It is too kind of you. Mr. Lovett has just been telling me that the inn is very decent, that there are genuine rafters, and venerable dates carved upon the lintels of the doors."

"I am afraid, then, I cannot compete," said Cintra. "But you will dine with me, won't you? Mr. Lovett will bring you back. What have you decided to do?" she said to Lovett. As she turned to him, her voice grew suddenly hard.

"My train goes some time after half-past eight. The fly can fetch me here, if you don't mind my not changing for dinner."

As they went out she followed them into the hall, for the thought of being left alone with Blanche was too oppressive, and as soon as they were gone she suggested showing Blanche her room. Mrs. Benwell moved her lips, but did not make a sound, and she followed her hostess up the staircase in silence. On the way Cintra tried desperately to say something natural. Her sense of guilt prompted her to apologies, to extreme friendliness, and then a sort of panic prevented her from speaking at all. Even when the door between their rooms had closed, she was not rid of the sensation; she wondered if Blanche had seen, if she were hurt, of what she was thinking, and she felt her nearness as something oppressive enough to be dreadful.

She hurried with her dressing to be able to escape from the sight of Blanche's door, yet Lovett and Carfrae had

Digitized by Google

arrived when she went down, and were talking with interest by the hall fire.

She went up to them, achieving her usual indolent air, and rested one hand upon the mantelpiece. Her pale yellow dress made the mass of her hair look dark, but there was a reddish reflection in the smooth sweep from her temples, and a reddish light in the clear line of the eyebrows that so delicately balanced the proportions of her long, pale face.

"I've told Mr. Lovett that he ought not to go to-night," said Carfrae. "Why go North at this season, and in such an uncomfortable way?"

"I don't mind that," answered Lovett. "And I must go now. I have telegraphed."

"Are you like a certain type of person I know—the slave of what you have planned to do?" asked Cintra, in an artificial voice. "'I can't do that; I never *planned* to do it,' is an answer I sometimes get—an infuriating one!"

Lovett bowed ironically.

"You see, I have so little imagination!" he answered.

"You must cultivate it. . . . Try to help him, Mr. Carfrae. I hear you are writing a play."

Up to then Carfrae had been genial, in his own way, but her last remark might have been thrown at a rock, and his unresponsiveness made her raise her eyebrows.

"Isn't it true? I thought you were writing a play for Blanche to act in."

"I had no idea it was generally known," he said, without hurry, though she had suggested a reproof. "But then, of course, you are a friend of Mrs. Benwell's. . . . I did begin a play at one time, but I have come to a standstill."

"What a pity! And why?" she asked, hardly listening, and conscious only of Lovett.

"I must answer as Lovett did. You see, I have so little imagination."

"Then, if you can't imagine anything new, why not

Digitized by Google

copy what you see ?" she said, knowing something of the play from Cecil Armathwaite, who could not keep quiet about it. "I am sure that everybody's life could be made into a play, if one knew how to do it. Why not take what you see ?"

"What I see changes its nature so rapidly that I don't know what to put down."

Her eyes had wandered, and she tried to conceal the fact of her abstraction by looking grave.

"That makes it difficult, of course."

She was thinking that, had dinner been ready on time, there might have been some chance of seeing Lovett afterwards, before the cab arrived; but she was obliged to wait for Blanche, and Blanche had not come down. The quarter had struck before Mrs. Benwell made her appearance, yet, as though unconscious she was late, she stayed on the threshold and did not excuse herself, nor even attempt to join the little group by the fire.

"Yes, something is the matter," thought Cintra, forgetting for a moment her feverish calculations of time. Blanche, as usual, wore black, and it seemed to Cintra that her head and neck were as fair as if they had been shone upon by moonlight.

"I hope you feel more rested. Do you ?"

"I did take a rest, thank you very much." And, as though it were the effect of her presence, no one spoke for a moment.

The parlourmaid announced dinner at last, and Cintra made an instant move into the dining-room.

"You must eat enough before you go," she said to Lovett, and she looked to see what he was putting on his plate.

She forgot Blanche, and her vague sense of panic became misery over his departure. In the thought that he must travel all night long, uncomfortable and perhaps unhappy, there was despair, as over something irrevocable. It was like the agitation she used to feel as a child upon the eve of a journey. She felt it so strongly on looking round the room, and thinking he must leave its quiet

Digitized by Google

for the discomfort and possible danger of a train, that she wondered if it were a premonition she was receiving. She could hardly speak, and when she heard the cab in the distance it was like a knell to her.

But there was not to be a chance to speak to each other, and the touch of their hands at the end was as cold as her presentiment. Then the lamps of the cab in the pitch-dark street, the burly figure of the cabman, photographed themselves upon her memory, as well as a glimpse of Lovett's face, cut across by the shadow of his hat. The door was shut, the wheels rolled away, and she was left looking into the empty dimness of the hall.

She could not go back to the others. What were they saying, what were they thinking of her ? Did they know it was because of Lovett that she hadn't wanted them to come ? The thought was like a blow to her pride. Were they wondering why Lovett had gone away ? It required all her courage to go back.

Blanche was sitting with her elbow on the table and her chin in her hand, and she raised her eyes as Cintra came in. Cintra was thinking then that it had been a very unconventional action to leave her other guests and accompany Lovett to the front-door. . . . .

" Is Chantry very far from here ?" asked Carfrae in a few moments. " I have a friend staying there, and I might run over and see him to-morrow if it isn't far."

Cintra did not answer at first. She had been sure Lovett's name was going to be mentioned, and when it did not come she was amazed. She was so full of the tumult of parting with him it seemed impossible these people should not know of it. But when she looked at Blanche she saw that Mrs. Benwell's eyes were resting on Carfrae, and for the first time she was struck by the emptiness of those large grey eyes. Then the emptiness of the whole face was revealed to her. Blanche had always had an air of dreaming, as though her soul and thoughts were elsewhere; but as she sat with her chin in her hand, looking at Carfrae, she was like a somnambulist

Digitized by Google

galvanized into action without conscious thought at all. Carfrae, as it were irresistibly, looked round at her even while speaking to Cintra.

The blankness of humiliation, a sort of bitter quiet, settled upon Cintra at that. She had imagined they were thinking about her, and she saw that, on the contrary, she was entirely unimportant to both. Almost, at that moment, they did not appear to know she was present. They were unaware of her to such an extent that she felt it must be right and natural that they should be, and when she saw them so engrossed in each other or in themselves they became immensely important and interesting to her—more important than herself.

"Chantry is only three miles from here. You could do it easily."

"I think, then, I ought to stay over another day."

When Carfrae left, Mrs. Benwell was easily persuaded to go up to bed. Carfrae had said she was tired. Cintra promised to follow very soon, lit Blanche's candle for her, and saw her disappear up the steep, ladder-like stairs. Then she went aimlessly back into the hall. She only wanted to postpone the moment when she must talk to Blanche. She heard Annie locking up in the kitchen, and she pretended to be looking for a book as the servant came into the room.

"Put out the lamps, and leave me my candle, Annie; and go to bed yourself. I shan't be long."

The servant's footsteps died away along the upper landing, but just as all was still again Cintra caught a sound on the path outside. It seemed to be right at the window, distinct from the sighing in the trees, and she uttered a cry before recognizing Carfrae's voice.

"I am afraid I have startled you," it said; "but I have dropped the key that the innkeeper gave me, and I don't think I can get in without it."

"Come in and see if it is here," she answered, and, having unlocked the door for him, she seized the candle and lowered it to assist his search.

She did not notice that the tallow dripped over her

Digitized by Google

fingers, she hardly noticed when the key was found in the corner by the dining-room door.

"She's ill," she said suddenly, and yet she had not been definitely thinking of Blanche.

Carfrae straightened himself from his stoop, and took hold of the back of a chair.

"That's it, and I wanted to ask you to be good to her." He added: "It was I induced her to come here."

"So it wasn't by chance you met her at the station?"

"No," he answered, at first without any qualifications. After another moment: "I found her in this state—not well, as you see—a few days ago, and I tried to persuade her to leave town and take a change somewhere. She wouldn't hear of it, and even I didn't want her to go off alone. She wasn't fit for that. There was no one she liked who could go with her—but then at last she told me you had often asked her to come down here. That seemed to me an excellent idea. I thought you would understand if I came, too, and that you would put up with her poor spirits."

"Is it her spirits that are low?"

"They may be the result of her ill-health."

"It seems so strange. I never connected poor spirits with her before."

He put his hands in his pockets, and did not reply.

"I'll do my best," she said. The sudden morbid interest she had taken in him and Blanche was changing its nature, but it was because it had been that she said:

"When I first met Blanche I was very unhappy, and she helped me just because she was what she was. I often went to see her. . . . How strange it all is!" she added, looking round the room.

"Well, I must be off," said Carfrae. "It is late."

She locked the door after him, and went upstairs. She wanted to see Blanche, but in her own room, outside Blanche's door, she hesitated. When at last she knocked, there was a perceptible wait before she heard a faint, "Come in!"

Two candles were on the chest of drawers, and as the

Digitized by Google

window was open the twin flames streamed in the draught. Blanche was standing at the dressing-table, her startled eyes turned upon the door.

"Oh, Blanche!" Cintra said.

In a moment she might have kissed her, but then she stopped, she did not know why.

"We ought to shut the window," she said instead.

The muslin curtains were blowing out into the room, and, having closed the window, she straightened them carefully. When she turned round the candle-flames were burning upwards and the room was brighter.

"I am so glad you came, for I would like . . . you helped me so much once, but you never knew. But I've often wondered if I could explain to you what you did for me——"

"But I never helped you," answered Blanche. She retreated a few steps, and then sat down on the edge of the bed, where she smoothed the cover on either side of her. "I couldn't—I couldn't ever have helped anybody."

As soon as she began to speak Cintra was chilled. Her impulse died away. There was a long interval, and absently, leaning against the chest of drawers, she pinched a rim of candle-tallow with her fingers.

"You would never have understood," she said, not looking at Blanche.

There was another interval, so long she felt that she had been unkind, and she turned around. Blanche, her hands resting on the edge of the bed, sat all drawn together, looking down, and, while Cintra gazed at her, the Psyche-like attitude served to make clear a startling possibility. Hitherto she had accepted Blanche's beauty as something inalterably cloistered though men might admire it through a grille; but now a conviction leapt into life that so much loveliness in a woman must perforce create a history for itself, and cannot be lived out always between convent walls. She made a sudden movement forward, and Julian became as real to her as an actual presence.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVIII

A SUNNY, windy morning was brightening the faded pink walls of the room when Cintra went in to see her guest before breakfast, and in its radiant setting Blanche's face, as she sat reading by the window, looked more worn and vacant than before.

"Why did you get up, Blanche? You could so easily have had your breakfast in your room. I came to ask you."

She could not bring herself to go up and kiss Blanche, and she stood by the door, with her hand on the latch. Julian was now so vivid to her that it seemed as though he must be near, and she about to see him at any moment; and some connection between him and Blanche seemed too certain to be doubted. As Blanche put away her *Garden of the Soul* in a drawer of the dressing-table, Cintra thought: "What would he think of her this morning? Would he be attracted just because she is so pale?" and she forgot that she was standing and gazing in silence. She remembered only when Blanche turned to her, and then she hastened to say:

"You must feel strange without your early Mass. On Sunday, will you go to Chantry, as you used to?"

"I couldn't have come if it hadn't been for that," said Blanche quickly. "But you needn't send me in; I can walk."

"I can easily send you." And instead of resenting a rebuff, she felt, as she had done the night before, that it was right and natural Blanche should so ignore her.

Breakfast was ready, and they went down.

The white spring sunshine on the window-sill looked like a fresh fall of snow, and the air felt newly washed

Digitized by Google

and cold, but in spite of the cold there was a sort of rapture in the new day, though Cintra did not feel it. Her hands paused after the tea had been poured, and the chance that had brought Blanche to Heddenham at just that time seemed strange and sinister.

"Are there any letters for me?" asked Mrs. Benwell.

The teapot nearly fell from Cintra's hand.

Annie placed the letters beside the tea-tray, and Cintra scattered them in her haste. When she saw they were all for herself, the blood flowed back to her heart as if an immense danger had only just been averted. Between Blanche's question and the sorting of the letters she had had time to determine that, in the event of one from Julian, she would leave on some excuse, and go up to town that very day. Nothing would have induced her to remain.

"Is it indiscreet to wonder if you are expecting anything very special?" she asked, shading her face with her hand.

"I am waiting to hear from Father Dudley. He has been ill, but the moment he can see me I must go back to town."

"But why? Why should Father Dudley put you into such a hurry?"

"I must go," repeated Blanche.

After that Cintra took up her letters and pretended to read them, and Blanche looked down at her cup. She wore the grey dress in which she had arrived, and a broad white ruche about the collar yielded to the turn of her neck and curved with her chin when she looked down. Cintra dropped her letter, and suddenly, while trying to decide if Blanche had told her the truth, she was at a loss to know why she had thought of Julian in such a connection at all. His name had never been mentioned, and his attitude at Cecil Armathwaite's dinner when speaking to Blanche need not have assumed so serious a significance. It had meant, probably, only that he admired her. With that idea she had a great uplift of joyousness.

"What will we do to-day?" she exclaimed. "Is there anything you would like to do?"

Digitized by Google

"Thank you, nothing. At least, nothing especially."

Once more Cintra's impulse died almost as soon as it had quickened.

"Mr. Carfrae said he would like to go to Chantry."

"Yes; he has a friend there."

"Mr. Carfrae seems so nice. I like him so much. He seems so kind."

"Yes; he is very kind," said Blanche. "He is wonderfully kind. You have no idea."

She mused.

"You have no idea," she said again, and again looked down at her cup.

The fascination she had had for Cintra in the old days was nothing compared to that which she exercised now. After breakfast they went into the morning-room, and above the careless stitching of a piece of tapestry-work that was her refuge in situations of any embarrassment Cintra watched Blanche, who seemed—but that had always been characteristic of her—content to sit in silence. She did not even use the newspaper as an excuse, but let it lie on her knees. All the same, there was a change in her, as if some spring had been broken, and the machinery of life hobbled and ran slow; but it seemed to Cintra that it was the machinery of the mental and moral life rather than of the physical.

"If I mention his name I will know," thought Cintra. "Surely the signs would be the same in her as they were in me." And hastily she said aloud: "What a lovely day we've got!" for she felt that it was on her tongue to speak of Julian. At the idea of speaking of him she grew cold all over.

Her excitement waxed, and at one moment she thought of leaving the room. Then at once she felt that she must speak, and she was on the point of speaking when a bell rang.

"Isn't that someone? Isn't that George?"

"But tell me," said Cintra, and as she jumped up impetuously on Carfrae's entrance her mind revolved impossible possibilities, such as begging Carfrae to wait a

Digitized by Google

moment, as she wished to ask a question of Blanche, or calling Blanche out of the room and asking her the question point blank.

"I hope you didn't mind the inn," she said at last, with an effort that was almost wild, and she sat down again. "Was it very bad?"

"Not at all. It is a delightful place. . . . I am afraid I have come extremely early, but I thought you might both of you be going out. . . ."

She could not have said afterwards what she and Carfrae talked about. She only knew that in some way it was arranged he should take Blanche for a walk.

The whole house looked different to her when Blanche and he had gone. Not only that, it looked different to what it had ever been before. And she was different. The morning-room had known Charles Lovett, and it was in the hall that she had received the shock of hearing he was going away. That had taken place only the previous afternoon, but already she was changed. And he—he seemed to have slipped back into the man she had first met, an obscure, unimportant young man. To test the change, she asked herself what she would feel if Charles Lovett were to come into the room. . . . She could not imagine or represent to herself any possible emotion, and it seemed as though, had he been capable of inspiring emotion in her, she must have realized something of it by merely imagining him suddenly entering the door. This sudden blankness was incomprehensible when she remembered how tragic she had been over his going away.

In the house she was too confined, and she put on her hat and went out. She took the steep path down to the meadows, walking with her head bent, and not noticing the delicate, tentative spring in the hedges. The marshland was drained by intersecting ditches that cut it up into pastures where cattle were grazing, and on the flat expanses occasional groups of fir-trees betrayed the eagerness of the wind. And all the time that Cintra was asking herself what had happened to her, and, not knowing, was aghast at her pain, white clouds were sweeping across

Digitized by Google

a high, radiant sky, throwing their shadows over the slopes of the Downs, and their quick reflections upon the pools that still widely flecked the plain. Then, suddenly coming to a standstill, she became aware of the morning, and she wondered why she should at such a time be confronted with this free horizon, and with so much freshness and beauty. Would she ever again, she thought, be able to meet such a scene with rejoicing? It seemed as though it should be simple to love, and be loved in return, but she was twenty-five years old, and it had never happened to her as she wished it to happen.

A plover flew up out of the reeds, and rocked overhead with a shrill and discontented cry, and the broad wings, white, edged with a band of black, reminded her of birds upon a Japanese screen. She noticed everything now—the grey-green of the willows, and even the horseman moving along a distant road. Not far from her path four bullocks were standing in profile to her on the earth bank thrown up beside a ditch, and she saw that they looked like sacrificial animals upon a marble frieze. Then, leaning on a wooden gate, she covered her eyes with her hands.

"How unhappy I am!" she said to herself, and a sense of unhappiness rose in her, like the rising of a flood.

For years Julian had not made himself so felt. Even seeing him again had left her calmer. She had seen him in London during an unimaginative period, but since then she had completed a cycle, as it were, and the time had come for her love again to seek another object. At this dangerous moment she had wondered what it was in him that Blanche was in love with, and she had been seized upon over again by the tyranny of what she herself had found. He had been romance itself to her, and though that quality of romance had long since begun to exist in her memory quite separately from the man, the personal feeling was renewed like fire in the proximity of someone to whom he must be romance too. When she felt that Blanche loved him, the spirit of days she, Cintra, had dedicated to the thought of him—the spirit that had

Digitized by Google

animated that marvellous suggestiveness which, because of him, lay in everything she saw and heard, and made fertile both her mental and spiritual life during the period of his influence—was quickened into being once more. She was reminded of how acutely she had lived for a time after knowing him, and subsequent events dropped colourlessly away from all recollection.

"I am not in love with him any longer," she thought in terror, but she felt that the man she could be in love with must in some way resemble him. She could never be in love with a man who had not a mind something like Julian's, and something of his looks as well—something like that decidedly drawn face, and that striking appearance. Inevitably she compared him with Charles Lovett. . . . Some people might think Charles Lovett almost as good-looking as Julian, but there was an element in that which Julian had been that was lacking in Lovett. Everything about Julian appeared unusual to her. She could not picture his life, because she thought it must be more unusual than anything she could imagine, and she felt as if Lovett, on the contrary, had a life quite open to her comprehension, as if, in her affection for him, her mind could embrace all his pleasant regularity and charm. She knew and understood Lovett; he lived within her range of vision. But Julian had always had a magic for her that kept him far outside the commonplaceness of her understanding.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIX

BLANCHE and Carfrae had unlatched a door at the back of the house, and had come upon a secluded little path, of grey flagstones set deep in a smooth, green lawn. A high brick wall, mellowed by many weathers, enclosed some fruit-trees, and long beds of yellow tulips. Unobservant as she always was, Blanche did not at first remember this garden, which came as a surprise. She went on a few steps, and then looked back at the house, and suddenly she had again that childhood's sense of *coming through.*

Carfrae, too, glanced behind him, and he startled her when he said:

"It seems so strange to be here, and now to have this still place to ourselves. How did we ever get here, do you think?"

"There is a gate somewhere, . . ." she said, with a quick look.

At the end of the path, and a few steps down, was a stone terrace, and from there they looked over the marshes to the far forest; over the striping water and wide pastures; over the young green, the radiant blue, and the hurry of clouds.

"The gate is below," she said, after but a glance at the prospect. "I remember now."

She led him along a narrower path running steeply downhill. It curved and ran back under the terrace, where nestled a little summer-house.

"We could stop here for a bit," said Carfrae. . . .

"Were we not going for a walk?" she asked. "Why do we rest already?"

"I am afraid I worry you!" he said. "That's what the matter is."

Digitized by Google

She did not answer.

"You are afraid I will speak of certain things. . . . You said yesterday you regretted having told me anything, but you must know you told me nothing I hadn't guessed before. And I am of no account. I don't mean that in any bitterness, but simply that I, as myself, am of no account in this matter."

"You mustn't feel that, for I have never felt it for a moment. It wasn't that that made me. . . . And really I would like to sit down and rest for a little."

He moved aside to let her pass him.

"How pretty it is!" she said, looking unseeingly about her.

She sat down on the little bench before the rustic table, but he continued to stand.

"Sit down, sit down!" she repeated quickly. "I want to stay here." And she clasped both hands on her knees, from which flowed, like a strong volume of water, the amplitude of her pale grey dress. In her face and posture there then appeared the fixedness of an almost unnatural preoccupation.

"You only told me that you wished to see Father Dudley. You seem," he added, searching for a means of rousing her, "to be living for that."

"All will be made clear to me when I see him."

"What will be made clear?"

"He will inflict some penance upon me, and tell me what to do. I will feel as if I knew what God thought of me when I see him. And the Sacrament of Penance will make me whole."

"And then will all your trouble vanish away?"

"Why do you ask me that?" she said, lifting her eyes.

Carfrae stirred as if he had been pricked.

"When you ask me——" she began, almost with anger. ". . . I don't think you understand me. It isn't only this time. But you ask me questions. Why do you ask me these questions? You could never understand, and it has seemed so strange to me."

Digitized by Google

When she spoke of his questions he felt ashamed, for there seemed something inhuman in his desire to see into her heart.

"I think I understand what you feel, even though I don't believe as you do. Not that I disbelieve," he said to himself, but she heard him.

"Father Dudley will help me to return to God."

He was as afraid of startling away her confidence as he might have been of startling a bird, and dared not even move, the while she deeply contemplated the line of bending willows that fringed a brook at the foot of the slope.

"I must be made to feel my guilt even more than I do," she said, in a low voice. "I don't feel it enough. . . . I think too much of other things. And now let's go," she went on, with a collectedness more desperate than agitation. "It must be late."

Whatever they were doing, and wherever they were, she always wished to change, and to be somewhere else, but he never opposed her. Yet he was perplexed, for she was not taking this crisis in her life as he would have imagined it could be taken. The obstinacy of her desire to see Father Dudley, even given her conscience and her religiousness, amazed him. It was more than a desire. It seemed the only definite thought she had, the only future she possessed. . . . He had come to believe she did not think consecutively of Julian at all.

Not till they were in the train coming to Heddenham did she even mention the fact that something was the matter, and he had not let her see that, all the same, he had guessed what it was. He had known for some time that she was in love with Julian Eames, and he was able to tell, from the change that suddenly took place in her, just when the crisis must have occurred. The change in its completeness was horrible to him, more especially as he did not know the exact nature of the crisis; but all that was given him to do was to get her away from London, and, as he thought, from Eames. It was only in the train that Blanche told him Julian

Digitized by Google

Eames had gone abroad, and he would have taken her back to London had not Miss Ellison been expecting them.

As for understanding the different phases of her emotion, he could not; but he tried to imagine what thoughts, what feelings of remorse, what explanations, and what consolations, her religiousness would give birth to in this hour of her need. He could not guess, for he did not share her beliefs. That suddenly struck him. . . . He had thought he understood her religiousness, but he had merely taken it for granted. So, after all, he had never understood her, and he never would, though he had always thought he understood her perfectly. He had clearly seen the pattern, as it were, of her life and character, and had thought there was no more to see, when that was but an external pattern, and the inner life lay far beyond him. An inner life whose intricate thoughts could never be put into words, with hopes and fears he could never share, motives he could never translate into the terms of his own perceptions—all that he had never actually thought of. Now his thoughts took another extreme, and as they moved up the steep path together she seemed so unaccountable to him that he dreaded to hear her speak, for he did not know in what words and ideas she would break into expression.

At the top of the path she stopped and sighed, with a catch in her breath.

"Why did you want me to come here? I thought I didn't mind where I went, but now I am here I wish I hadn't come!"

"I am sorry," he said humbly. "It was a mistake in judgment."

She let herself be drawn to the terrace, and leaned upon the balustrade, with him beside her. In the blowing of the wind he heard the cuckoo's note quite near, softly and continually repeated, and for a second he forgot the present, forgot even her, and yielded to a sensation of unexpected sweetness. But Blanche gave a start.

Digitized by Google

"What time is it?" she asked, with excitement. "Oughtn't we to go in to lunch?"

He looked at his watch.

"It isn't half-past eleven yet," he answered.

Tears gushed to her eyes.

"Not half-past eleven yet!"

She turned away from him, almost staggering, and began to weep.

"The morning is not even gone! The long, long morning. More hours of it. I thought, perhaps, it was over, but even that is not over!"

At the sight of this abandonment of grief something seemed to break within him. He exclaimed over the pain.

"I wake up in the early morning, and think of the long, long day before me. . . . At the end of each hour I am glad that that, at least, has passed, and when I find it is not so late as I thought I sometimes lose my courage——"

But her voice changed with the last word. Looking closely at him, her face, too, changed, and became quite calm.

"When one has sinned, the whole of life becomes tainted. I am sinning every moment. I have lost God, that is why I am losing all these precious hours. Think of these precious hours! Gone! As I have not God to live for, there is no reason for living at all. That is why I want morning to be afternoon, this afternoon quickly to be to-morrow morning. . . . I am losing my soul. If I were to die! Think, think!" she said, putting her hands up to her ears. "Think!"

But he seized her hand, with the idea of forcing her to think differently.

"Blanche, how can you believe that?"

"You mustn't argue, you mustn't reason with me! I have within me a knowledge that is so much greater than reason! All the same, it is sometimes obscured. Sometimes I have wanted to die. It is hard not to. It is a very great temptation."

She walked away a few yards, and then came back.

Digitized by Google

"Father Dudley will show me the way back to the bosom of Holy Church. I must be led. He will lead me like a little child." Her hands made a slight gesture, as if to receive a child running towards her, and a fugitive expression of tenderness passed over her face.

She turned away again, and, resting on the balustrade, became suddenly engrossed. Her tears had left her paler even than before, and had accentuated the bruise-like darkness under her eyes. Her lids were heavy, and the delicacy of her whole face suggested a fear to his mind, as the discovery of too perfect a flower can make one think, in the very moment of delight, of the hand that may pick it.

He noticed the white ruche curving with the turn of her neck, and the tendrils of her hair under her hat of white chip straw, which was trimmed with a grey satin ribbon. But as he watched her her breath was caught in a sob, and tears came again to her eyes.

"Let us go," she said, putting her hand on his arm.

They entered the house by the little door they had unlatched an hour before, and they made their way to the corner room where Blanche had sat with Cintra after breakfast.

She leaned back in the same deep chair, and as their talk seemed to be at an end he wondered what there was to do. To him, too, the early hour was oppressive, and the prospect of the afternoon equally impossible. He couldn't write; but their hostess, what was she going to do? As he examined the room, which he had not thought to do before—as he admired the bird-and-flower chintz, and the quaint shelves covered with china and ornaments of old brass high up along the walls—he awakened with a kind of surprise to his ignorance of the personality whose setting this was. This was a woman's house, to which he had come without giving it, as an individuality, a single consideration; and then he heard the unfamiliar ticking of the clock. He thought that nothing so brought home the strangeness of a room as the ticking of the clock while one waited in a silence.

Digitized by Google

"What sort of a woman is Miss Ellison?" he asked, and the question sounded as though he lacked sympathy for Blanche. He himself did not understand how curiosity could have led his attention away from her.

She answered, with her forehead resting on her hand:

"She has nothing to make her unhappy."

"We don't know that," said Carfrae gently.

She glanced up as if surprised, but vaguely, while her eyes wandered from object to object.

"She must be happy. Why shouldn't she be? She isn't married. All her life is before her."

The vagueness of her face meant indifference, and he contemplated the long distance she had travelled from her former self. This indifference to other people, to her own friend, marked the change in her.

"Helena!"

"Why do you say that? All that has gone now, has become like a dream."

"I know," he said. "It's all over." But to himself he thought: "Can it be true? Can it be possible?" And he saw deep into the emptiness that had suddenly swallowed his future.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XX

THAT day and the next lengthened themselves out like a hill as one approaches it, and only when they were over did she realize they had been as weary as she had foreseen.

In the early part of the next afternoon Blanche went to rest in her room, and Carfrae left again to meet his friend, who was riding over from Chantry. The sun had gone in, and an approaching rain-storm was flying across the plain, darkening the whole horizon, by the time he returned. It hurried him up the road, and, coming in as he did out of the bluster of the wind, the empty hall made an impression of excessive stillness upon him. He was savouring it, seeing also something austere and suggestive in the dimly shadowed mirror that reflected a corner he did not instantly recognize, when Mrs. Benwell opened the inner door.

"George," she said, "what a long time you have been!"

Something in her voice made him go quickly towards her.

"You must take me away from here. I cannot stay."

He felt, but controlled, a spasm of fear, and asked without any particular emphasis:

"What news have you had?"

"You brought me here, and so you can take me away. I never wanted to come, but I am not ungrateful. . . . You mustn't think that. . . . You were so good."

He drew her to the window-seat, and as she clung to his arm he sat down beside her. "You brought me here, and you will know what to tell her. . . . But what is the matter?" she asked, and her change of manner seemed unnatural. She narrowed her eyes as though she had difficulty in seeing. "What is it? Why don't you answer?"

Digitized by Google

"I was thinking we had no right to treat her as we have."

She looked down, her hands, barely interlaced, falling to her knee. A sense of unreality took him, and he touched her arm.

"Are you Blanche?" he said.

"I have such a strange feeling in my head," she answered quickly. "I feel I am always going to hear music, but it dies just when I am going to catch the melody."

He covered her hand with his.

"You are going to take me away, George? I knew you would."

Tears rose to her eyes, he felt as much from exhaustion as from emotion. He had noticed that lately they brimmed with any effort, even physical, that she made.

"What did she do to make you feel like this?"

"Can nothing be kept sacred? Must I speak of everything?" A tide of scarlet passionately flooded her face.

"They ask me questions about him, and must I answer? Cannot I keep anything hidden, anything to myself?"

He felt a communicated agony.

"I ask you nothing."

Her colour already had begun to ebb.

"But *she* asked me about him, and where he had gone. This afternoon she came to my door and stood there, and I thought she was going to speak of him again. She stood at the door, and I looked around, and *there was no other door to the room.*"

He drew her hands back into his.

"You could control that. You must say to yourself, 'What does it matter?'"

"Promise me, promise me!" she interrupted. She looked bewildered at the sound of her own voice. "I always think I am going to hear his name. I thought then you were going to say it. . . . Yesterday at the station the porter came towards me, and it seemed as if he, too——"

"When those fancies come to you, you can at least reason with yourself."

Digitized by Google

She suddenly put him aside with a gesture of her hand.

"These fancies are a punishment because I am in mortal sin."

Carfrae made a sound of despair.

"But do I not know? . . . What is mortal sin? It is turning away from God to one of His creatures. And what are the signs of it? Bitterness, shame, fear, disquietude. Have I not all those signs within me? Till I can root up this thought from my mind . . . That has been made as clear to me as if a voice had spoken in my brain. It was a miracle, I think, like my conversion."

She spoke as if by rote, as she always did when speaking of her religion. She added at the end: "Think of the joy of penance!" before turning towards him.

"What will you say to her, George?"

"To Miss Ellison?"

It was not long before she was provided with an excuse for leaving. Before Cintra got back—and a quarter of an hour later she was as if blown into the house by a great gust of wind—a telegram for Mrs. Benwell had arrived. It was from Father Dudley, and told her he could see her the following day.

When Cintra appeared, Blanche hurriedly rose.

"I am afraid I shall have to leave to-morrow morning. What trains are there in the morning? Had I not better go up and pack at once? I don't want to disturb anybody, and then I may have to leave very early. I have just had a telegram telling me to come."

"It will be all right. It won't take such a long time to pack. What a pity that, now you are here, you must leave again so soon!" said Cintra, and Carfrae lost nothing of the way she looked at Blanche—a long look, in which he saw an opinion slowly formulating, though he imagined that usually she would be quick at her opinions. And with that opinion she hardened. Then she looked at him, and he felt he was regretting and explaining, and that she remained implacable.

She got up and left the room, and Blanche did not even notice her departure.

Digitized by Google

"Would eight o'clock be too early for you, George? He did not say what time he could see me, but on Saturdays he hears confessions until one o'clock. I had better be early——"

Carfrae did not reply.

He was revolting against her blindness, and yet this mental quality of hers had once seemed mere unperceptiveness, or a blindness infinitely touching, the inward sight of the recluse. Why had his point of view with regard to her so essentially changed? Was it because he had never before seen her drawn into the orbit of other lives? She had always been, as it were, fixed in her own life, which drew others to itself; therefore, never before had it seemed strange that she should be so unaware of any but her own stars. This vision of her was suddenly blurred by an immense compassion.

"I will do what you want. Anything to help you."

He stayed on, even after both women had left him alone in the hall. The house held elusive suggestions for him, had done so ever since he first caught sight of the greyish-yellow stone in that flight of firs, and he was glad to be left alone in a room whose windows were darkened by those gnarled and restless trees. And the furniture of the room was ghostly in the half-light—the two cabinets, the black frames holding the pale engravings, even the empty chairs. The dim pool of the mirror gathered all the stillness of the room into a centre, and with the heaviness of his mood there was a kind of stillness that reflected memories. Nothing suggested itself sharply to him, and everything that concerned himself was dulled by a sort of heavy resignation. He did not even regret the play as he remembered Helena's entrance, which had been like a slipping in of moonlight. During the whole of her short first scene in the first act she never said a word, but stood listening in the middle of the stage, while the action of the play, in which she had no active part, inevitably changed its course beneath her mild, uncomprehending eyes. He had felt convinced that no one who saw Blanche standing there could help but

Digitized by Google

understand something of her spirit, as well as the influence she must exert over the iron setting he had given her.

For a few moments in the last act she was to have stood, as in the first, having in a way unknown to herself averted the obvious tragedy, whose nearness for a moment had frightened her, without ever knowing of the hidden tragedy at all.

The last act was unfinished, and he was never going to finish it, for the play was destined to remain a fragment. That was what he was trying to understand. He could never dissociate Blanche from the play, or give it a life other than hers, and as Helena she had ceased to exist. His life as well as Helena's had gone down in the wreckage, and the fragment of a play was all that remained of what had seemed so abiding and sure.

His solitude was disturbed at last. First there was a sound on the floor above, and then he heard someone coming down the stairs, and it seemed a long time to him before Cintra Ellison appeared.

"Has she decided to leave?" he asked.

"To-morrow morning. You have not stayed very long," she said. She was thinking, "When she was in the room I felt almost intimate with him, but he is an utter stranger," and she made an involuntary movement to go.

He, too, made an abrupt movement.

"Don't blame her, as you could so easily, for both her coming and going," he said. "I can guess what you are thinking, but don't form an opinion of her by taking her as she is now."

Before she knew it she had answered: "I know what is the matter with her."

"Then you must pity her," he said.

She smiled a little, and by degrees he saw in her eyes that she was thinking only of herself.

"How has this knowledge affected you?" he wanted to ask, and Helena's influence as he had once conceived it stood before his mind as in a flash of lightning; while

Digitized by Google

here, behind that little smile, Cintra seemed to be thinking of what Blanche had done to her.

"You imagine something because she is different to what she was once."

"Once!" she repeated, her eyes coming back to his face. A tremor passed through him.

"*Once!*" she said again. "Why, there is all the meaning of the grave in that one word!"

As if forgetting him in what she saw, she turned and went quickly out of the room, and he, in a sudden dream, left the house.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXI

He left Blanche at the door of the Oratory, and went on to his lodgings, where he was told that a gentleman had called for him twice the day before, and had seemed put out at not finding him. Also a telegram had come for him not an hour ago.

He found it on his table, and read an urgent message from Cecil Armathwaite.

He was little in the humour for Armathwaite, but he obeyed the summons to lunch at the flat, and met his host in the entrance-hall of the building waiting for the lift.

"My dear fellow," said Cecil in a low voice, "the thing is done."

He was interrupted by the descent of the lift, and in the presence of the lift-boy he spoke only of the postponement of his journey North. But his eye, solemn with meaning, held Carfrae's as he repeated:

"It is quite impossible for me to leave London now."

Carfrae said nothing, for whenever Cecil's manner became portentous his own grew that much more impassive, and he could not force himself to gratify Cecil with any show of impatience for his news. He knew this was childish, but he could not even smile.

It was without haste that he passed from the hall of the flat into the library, but Cecil followed quickly, and shut the door.

"My dear Carfrae, the play can be put into rehearsal at once."

Carfrae looked at him then, and in Cecil's face he saw excitement struggling in the grip of a pose, saw it yield for a moment as Cecil fluttered his eyelids, and then shine

Digitized by Google

forth triumphant in all its naturalness. Without paying any attention to Cecil's words he thought how simple, how unguarded, how naïve, is happiness, and still did not reply.

"You are as surprised as I might have been were I not superstitious, but I know success is easy. It is only after effort that we achieve failure. . . . Will you smoke before lunch? It will be ready in two minutes; but why think of the future? The present is too often left out of our calculations."

He threw himself back in a chair, having lit a cigarette, but through the smoke his eye again sought Carfrae's, and waited for a question. Carfrae was forced to make it.

"Well?"

"I met Gordon Conway on Thursday afternoon, and as soon as I saw him he said: 'And how is that play of yours? It couldn't possibly be as much of a failure as our present enterprise.'"

He sat up.

"He plays every night to an empty pit, about four stalls, seven dress circles, and the friends of the cast in the stage box. He has decided to take *Mrs. Grantley's Promise* off the boards."

There was a pause.

"You see where we are, of course. I submit our play to Gordon Conway, and if he likes it he puts it into rehearsal next week."

"Unfortunately for that plan, the play isn't finished."

"If you wrote the first act in six days, you can write the last one in seven, or five. We needn't pin you to any particular number. I propose to show the first three acts, and the scenario of the last, to Conway on Monday; and I would do so sooner, but he has a matinée and evening performance to-day, and spends Sunday in the country."

"Can he break his contract with his lead?"

"She contracted only for *Mrs. Grantley's Promise*."

"Conway, I suppose, is insured against risks with regard to our play, and encouraged in the matter of such unconventional details as the play being unfinished?"

Digitized by Google

Cecil sketched the well-known magnificent gesture.

"Mr. Conway must be acting *Mrs. Grantley's Promise* with a lighter heart since he heard all this."

Just then a servant entered to announce lunch, most opportunely, for it diverted Cecil's attention, and gave Carfrae several moments of silence in which to think. After the first shock of the news his mind had receded from the question, and had not really considered it at all. Irritability had been uppermost; he hardly remembered there was a comedy. Then, "Comedy!" he thought, watching Cecil speak to the servant; "what a comedy it is!"

The dishes were placed on the table, and the man withdrew.

"Well, George?"

"I was too anxious for this. When it comes, I am not ready for it."

His mind still hung away from the issue, and he yielded to vagueness of purpose, he who was usually, though leisurely, firm. It was a kind of weakness, too, to speak to Cecil as to an equal, for the sake of an experiment; and then it came to him, with a great surprise, that Cecil's face was taking a human expression. His renewed solemnity was not merely foolish.

"I understand, of course; but it is only a question of that fourth act, and"—he drank—"I have an idea of my own for that fourth act, if you want any—an effective incident——"

"My dear Armathwaite, I am sorry, I can't finish the play."

He did not notice that Cecil laid down his fork, he was too much occupied with the strength of the resistance within himself to his own decision.

"And what is the reason of this?"

"I can't explain, for I seem to have no reason, or only the reason that the mood, inspiration, is gone. That is not so mad a reason as you seem to think."

"You don't need inspiration, as you call it, with the scenario already finished. I won't argue with you, but the play must be produced, if I write the fourth act

Digitized by Google

myself. As I said, I have an idea. . . . What, with this opportunity! *Gordon Conway* coming forward, and every detail, down to this short contract with his lead, falling in on our side!"

"You needn't try to convince me," answered Carfrae. "I was as anxious for it as you."

He spoke with more resolution than before, for as soon as his mind admitted the possibility of the play it admitted the thought of Blanche as well, and with that came a kind of furious melancholy. The memory of her was so poignant that all else became unreal, ambitions dwindled, the whole question of the play surprised him.

"Why are we arguing? Why is it important that the play should be produced?"

"My dear fellow, I was always right when I said you were mad!"

The manservant returned with another course, performed futile services with an air of gloom, and departed again, shutting the door.

"For the sake of my opinion of your sanity, could you explain yourself further, George?"

"Perhaps you haven't seen Mrs. Benwell lately, but I find her in very delicate health."

"I thought your reason was lack of inspiration."

"I have several reasons. If Mrs. Benwell were very delicate, that would be a sufficient one in itself."

"Two weeks ago she wasn't ill, but she may be going to have scarlet fever now. I advised her to leave the convent long before she did."

He finished lighting his cigarette quite casually, but there had been something odd in his tone. Carfrae felt at once that he was jealous, for he had seen signs of that before, and Julian came vividly before his mind; and he thought of the many times Julian must have sat at that table, thought of Julian's conversation, and the peculiar intonation of his voice when in the society of Cecil's type of young man—an intonation which, if overheard, made a sturdier type dislike him. But Julian could adapt himself very nearly to the requirements of the

Digitized by Google

sturdier type also, though perhaps not always. . . . And Carfrae remembered Cecil's former hero-worship, and the humourous hypocrisy with which Julian had received it, the suavity with which he had so often made Armathwaite appear ridiculous.

"I don't say she is ill, but she has never been strong."

"Nothing untoward has occurred, I hope?"

"I can't imagine what could."

Cecil's question set him instantly on his guard. He had certainly never foreseen that Armathwaite might be so jealous—at any rate, might be ready to put constructions of his own on any change in Blanche. It made him see that he must be careful in his excuses for his own change of idea, and when Cecil, who had been sobered for a time by sheer horror, recovered his speech and began to argue, Carfrae was silent again, and attempted no defence.

"Mrs. Benwell did not *say* she was too ill to act, did she?" said Cecil.

"No."

"Well, then——" and after a time Carfrae agreed to make no further decisions before he saw Blanche.

"I can't go to see her to-day. She is busy."

"To-morrow, then. We must have everything settled between us before I see Gordon Conway on Monday."

Carfrae was thinking at that moment that Blanche might still be at the Oratory, and, though he could not tell what the moral result of her confession would be, such a wave of pity and rage rose up in him that he was choked. He could so clearly remember Julian in the library. The Persian miniature of Vishnu's peacocks reminded him of Julian's voice, and of the evening he had said: "What are these symbolic birds upon your wall, Armathwaite?"

He could not remember Armathwaite's languid answer, but he had guessed at the time that Cecil was delighted Julian should notice anything in his room.

As he came out into the street he said to himself the play must never be finished. How could he write that

Digitized by Google

last act, which needed such gentleness, such unconsciousness, such spiritual aloofness in her, remembering the terrible humanity of her tears ?

" How about Art ?" he thought, and as he remembered his theories his mouth twisted. " This play, then, cannot be Art. But what is Art ?" He stood at the corner of Hamilton Place waiting to cross over, and he thought of going up to the man who sold newspapers and asking him: " What is Art ?" Then he imagined himself writing the last act, blindly, according to the scenario—considering the play, that is, in the light of a business proposition, and finishing it in a week. But the play could not reduce itself to a business proposition any more than it could become Art. The more he thought of it, the more intimately he felt that the fourth act must never be written. He felt it so strongly that there was no room left for any sense of sacrifice. He could not let her stand in that scene as he had intended she should, in a contemplative silence, when out of her eyes, that should have been cloudless, all of her suffering might look forth. When he thought of that suffering, he shrank from meeting her again, because he could not help her.

" My poor Blanche, my hermit soul, what whiteness, what sweetness !" And he was as staggered by regret as if he had thrown himself against a wall.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXII

It was with actual fear that he went to see her the next afternoon, leaving Kensington far behind him, and striking across the Strand, which was desolate in the Sunday quiet, and empty but for a few omnibuses. He hated the long journey to her, for he wanted her back at the convent, and he thought if he could see the blistered door with the grating in it, and the face and habit of the porteress, and hear the jingle of her keys, he could feel differently himself. He would feel, perhaps, that the change in Blanche had been a delusion of his own.

Yet he had once delighted in the age of the narrow passage upon which Mrs. Turner's front-door opened, and in the deep colour and polish of the wainscotting, worn lustrous by time. Even the marbled paper on the staircase had taken a good colour, almost that of the oak. On each landing a square window, unevenly paned—windows whose sagging sashes might have been several hundred years old—lighted two doors facing each other, and on the second floor both rooms belonged to Blanche, for since Frieda Marks had left the other bedroom had been converted into a sitting-room for Mrs. Benwell's use.

In wondering how she would be, he had over and over again, on his way there, visualized the room where he was going to find her—a room that still looked a bedroom, though the bed had been taken away, and a screen hid the wash-hand stand; with woodwork painted brown, deal wardrobe and chest of drawers also painted brown, and a pair of illuminated texts over the fireplace. But when it met his eyes, and he saw her in a black dress sitting in the arm-chair, no unexpected revelation could have had

Digitized by Google

more sudden an effect upon him. He was all at once so shaken that he could not speak.

She made an effort to get up when she saw him, and he quickly crossed the room to prevent her from rising. Her attitude before she moved, a little huddled in her chair, and what seemed a rigid composure in her face, photographed themselves instantly and indelibly upon his memory. He lost no detail, not even the book bound in violet leather that slipped from her knees to the floor. And as he stood by her chair he was overwhelmingly conscious of the two great mysteries that confronted him in her—the mystery of faith, the even greater mystery of predilection.

He sat down, but she did not help him, and he could read nothing in her face. The intensity he had seen in her at Heddenham was gone. He searched for words. Would she ever speak of what had happened to her spiritually? Perhaps her religion forbade that—he did not know . . . and meanwhile he saw nothing but her features, beautiful but utterly inexpressive, and her eyes like clear pools of purest colour.

"Blanche, speak to me. Explain me the great mystery. What do you believe?"

She looked at him, appearing to consider him closely, but he felt that her face was a mask that was hiding her from him.

"Blanche, for a long time now you've been in the centre of my life. Take me into yours. . . . Tell me. What comfort did he give you?"

"Comfort!"

And he could see her thinking over the word. It seemed to stir something far beneath the surface; he saw that in her eyes.

"What did Father Dudley say to you?"

"He said I had deliberately deluded myself, and that was the actual sin."

As soon as she began to speak the quiver died in her face, while the quiet of her hands in her lap aroused in him the obscure beginnings of revolt.

Digitized by Google

" But it must not haunt me now." She looked down at her lap. " I am no longer in a state of sin; yet I wonder if I shall ever again be in a state of grace. Father Dudley says I will be more ready for actual grace if I don't brood over past sins, for I must not brood; he says brooding is wrong. I think I must be brooding now just because I am afraid I will."

He felt he was being wrapped about with unreality, against which he strove, only with a dream-like impotence. But he came near breaking through when he saw a flash of wildness on her face as she looked up. " My thoughts become thick, and make such a strange noise."

She added in a lower voice, again studying his face:

" And I keep thinking of my husband."

It was the first time that, of her own accord, she had ever mentioned her husband.

" It was strange how completely I had forgotten that part of my life, and I wonder if it is for some purpose that I am remembering now. I thought of it, as a sort of nightmare, all last week, but since yesterday I have thought of all that, my marriage and divorce, quite differently, and I think I see——"

After thinking a moment or two she said nearly inaudibly: " Perhaps I can't put it into words."

He remembered he had been afraid of meeting her again because of the terrible impression left on him by her tears. Now the impression of emptiness was even more terrible, and it so worked upon him that he got up from his chair. What was this situation that was at once so lifeless and tragic ? He had always thought of love as a state of mind, and one grows from one state of mind into another, or sheds it like a garment; but face to face with this he felt there was no escape from such a thing. They seemed shut into a darkness of irremediable sorrow —a sorrow so vast that the cause he knew of was inadequate. What was the real cause ? Perhaps their capacity for suffering, and from that there was no escape.

He heard her say, " We won't speak of all this ever again," and he turned around, astonished that words

Digitized by Google

should be able so to limit the situation. She was sitting in her black dress in the old-fashioned mahogany chair, and then, because her face was so calm, he had a sudden surcease from fear. Because there was so little change in her expression, he was less convinced of her tragedy. He in no way defined his relief, but because she looked as usual, wore a dress he knew, her hair arranged according to custom, he felt that hope was still possible.

And he began to see her emptiness as mere reaction, which he had really foreseen. In living for the moment of her confession, her conviction of sin had, as it were, occupied her mind; and when that anticipation was over, there was nothing, even nothing fearful, to see in the future at all. . . .

But once more the current of his thought completely changed. He became aware that they were gazing at each other, and he was suddenly aroused to his opinion of her position. Her calm, her emptiness, ceased to have their deadening effect upon him, and the atmosphere between them vibrated with the sound of his first word.

"If it tortures you to remember, will you force yourself to it because you think it is only right you should suffer?"

"I don't know, I don't know, George." But his own harshness had excited him.

"It seems to me you are made to suffer more than is even just. Why should you be made to stand by that mistake of marriage? Why, as long as even the law is on your side, aren't you allowed to acknowledge it was a mistake, and begin again, if you want to, with greater knowledge behind you?"

"Don't, don't—not that, not arguments. . . . Marriage is holy; it is irrevocable."

"It is not always holy. It can be blasphemy. And what people can do in innocence and ignorance, what they can be tricked into doing, or pushed into doing by their baser nature, should never be irrevocable! I know what the abuse of my idea could lead to, but I think it would be preferable to the abuses that cover themselves under yours. When I think of all the rules and diffi-

Digitized by Google

culties we have let other men make for us, it seems so monstrous, so incredible!"

"And the vow that one makes! You seem to forget that. The vow before God——"

"That is your strongest point, I know. The Sacrament! And, to my mind, marriage ought not to be treated as an unconditional vow; and we shouldn't keep it as one just because Moses found it safer for the children of Israel!"

But he stopped at last, seeing that she trembled all over, as if shaken by illness.

"When you speak of other people making me suffer, you never stop to think what you are doing. You seem to think it is all easy for me, faith and obedience and renunciation. . . . It isn't easy! Yet nobody has ever made it more difficult than you did then! And how dare you speak of right! How can *I* know what is right? I cannot judge. How can I judge? How can *I* know better than all those great men, great saints? Yet the heart longs," she said, and for a few moments she was almost unintelligible. "You don't know what my marriage was, or you wouldn't give me such thoughts. Blasphemy!" she repeated. "But I mustn't remember it as blasphemy; I must remember it as marriage! Even now that I know what marriage could mean, I must go on thinking of that other as marriage. Yesterday I seemed to stand upon a mountain-top, and I saw my whole life——" She had become a prey to so much emotion that she seemed about to lose all control of herself; but she put out her hand as if to hold him back.

"I saw that I had met a soul I could have turned to God, and that I had been told, 'That is not for you. Even the happiness of turning a soul to God is a sin for you!'"

She interrupted herself with a terrible unexpectedness. "But you don't believe me there! You don't believe he has faith—I feel you don't—and am I not right?" And her excitement seemed suddenly to mount towards a breaking point.

Digitized by Google

"Tell me, tell me—you have blamed him, haven't you? And you never thought it was ungenerous and cowardly to blame a man unheard? Ah, ungenerous, ungenerous, unworthy! But you have always, always, condemned him and hated him!"

He had nothing to answer for he would not deny what she said, and then in an extraordinary inner silence he seemed to receive an undying impression of her, and when he saw her face change, her whole appearance undergo a mysterious alteration, the impression was not blurred, but seemed to grow and become perfect. The beauty of her features was transfigured as her excitement dropped from her, and in a deep hush he felt he had foreseen it, and that he had always realized the greatness as well as the purity of her spirit. She stood before him, lifted to the grandeur of an exalted confidence.

"You think you have his own words to refute me! And I, too, had his own words, but I knew better than to believe them. With all that is perverse in him there is something else! Something"—she paused—"something I have felt as surely as if——" And she put out both her hands, palms upwards, and made a cup of them, at which she looked intently.

"As surely," she repeated, "as if I had been able to hold it in my hands!"

She remained for a moment looking at them, and then they dropped to her sides.

Carfrae saw the half-smile that had dawned in her face, and when he saw that smile, so confident, though so faint and mysterious, the realization of what had passed in his mind was like a spasm of sickness. His inhuman intellect seemed like a vulture perched upon his life, ready to devour all the sweetness and beauty of it.

For only a moment had the revelation of Blanche, the greatest revelation he had ever had of her, belonged intimately to himself. Almost at once an impersonal, an inhuman inspiration had lit up his brain, and he had seen her in his art and lost her as a human soul. The idea had been so vivid that in a moment the whole of the

Digitized by Google

third act had rewritten itself; he saw the whole of the play, and it seemed as though it would have to be finished now. The idea inspired by the change brought about in her through love, and the scene that constructed itself out of her moment of grandeur, were already calling him, insistent as the voice of instinct. He knew that he would yield and rewrite his play. It would be far greater than his original conception, it would be more dramatic, it would contain far more universality of emotion; but in that very moment he wondered if he would ever forget his shame at having failed Blanche as a fellow-being.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIII

It was an agitating time for Cecil Armathwaite. An extraordinary piece of information had come to his knowledge—he nearly shared it with Carfrae on one occasion—and then there was the play. And the matter of the play was not proceeding as smoothly as he wished. He was to have seen Gordon Conway on Monday morning, but as by Sunday midnight he had not been able to get hold of Carfrae to speak or communicate with, he was obliged to telegraph Conway and postpone the meeting. Monday morning saw him asking for Mrs. Benwell at her lodgings. The maidservant was sweeping the panelled passage, and Mrs. Turner in a print dress opened her door, to watch him go upstairs. He felt the disapproval, and lost some of his ease.

"Mrs. Benwell," he said, as soon as he came into the room, "I am afraid I have come very early."

He recovered his manner.

"Though I would wish always to come early, I would not dare, without some other reason."

Blanche had been seized with panic when she heard he had come, for she felt that everything that had seemed simple, everything that had grown familiar, was about to change its aspect and become menacing and terrible. And she did not know why Cecil should have a reason for coming; she did not even imagine what it could be, but her whole being cried out to be spared.

"May I sit down?" he asked.

Before the appeal he saw in her face he almost lost hold of what had seemed so important to him. She was wearing a morning dress of grey cotton, and he had never seen her in that kind of gown; but it was an unusually

Digitized by Google

warm day for the season; there was the gentleness of spring in the air, through which came faintly the cry of a vegetable vendor in the street.

"Carfrae was here yesterday, wasn't he?" He heard her answer, and carefully disposed of his hat and stick. "What did he say about the play?"

She looked infinitely startled, till, suddenly convinced of the simplicity of his question, she said: "He did not speak of it!"

For a moment she had thought he might be leading her into perils impossible to anticipate. . . .

"Really!" said Cecil, "this is very strange. There seems a remarkable disposition of the powers, earthly and otherwise, to thwart me!"

But the marvel of his news was able to make him forget his momentary anger, and he said to her: "Mrs. Benwell, what I have come for is this—the situation is . . . I mean, what I was going to tell you. The play can be put into rehearsal at once!"

He had expected a great deal from Carfrae and not so much from Blanche when he imagined himself imparting his news; then, when Carfrae disappointed him, he felt that the great answer must come from her. He leaned forward to receive it.

"The play!" she said, rousing herself from an astonished scrutiny of his face.

He told her what had passed between Conway and himself; what he had told Carfrae; all that he looked forward to; and while he talked she wondered if he had heard from Julian. When he finished speaking she seemed to be actually tasting misery.

"Then you don't feel you need give up the idea of acting because of your health?"

There was a strange feeling in her arms, and her hands did not seem to belong to her, but to be far away, to be dissolving into distance. She wondered if she could bring them back to herself, but for the time there did not seem to be any connection between her mind and her body, and she could not move.

Digitized by Google

"And when I see Carfrae I can tell him what you have said," continued Cecil, not asking, but stating. "This is the beginning of April, and the play must be produced by the first of June, or it will not be worth Conway's while. He is taking *Mrs. Grantley's Promise* off the boards, and if I had not made him the proposition I did, at the very moment I did, he would have settled upon letting his theatre."

He took breath, and then was led on to add, with solemnity: "Mrs. Benwell, I hope you will be glad that the fates guided our steps towards each other——" when the idea of saying more to her went suddenly to his head. He told himself he must be cautious, but he bent towards her hand, and though he did not take it, he said: "To what end do you think we met each other?" But even during the pause that followed nothing changed in the statue-like vacancy of her gaze.

His vanity staggered. It was incredible! She had not been listening to him! And while his smitten conceit bled silently and sullenly, a desire grew in volume within him—it was a long pause—to say something trenchant, something startling, to ask her strange questions, or to make strange confidences. What could he tell her? But he knew all the time what he could tell her, and the idea of telling her had been in the front of his mind ever since, about a week before, a man at the club had said: "Hullo, Armathwaite, have you heard what's come to my ears about that friend of ours?"

He wondered what would happen if he repeated the story that had been told him that memorable evening, mentioning names. And then, as he saw her eyelids droop over her eyes, he wondered what would happen if then and there he asked her to marry him, as he had always meant to do when, through him, she had become famous. For almost a minute it was an even chance whether he said the one thing or the other. But Julian's treachery, as he considered it, had left a soreness that was easily inflamed, and when he remembered she had taken lodgings over Julian's favourite book-shop the future

Digitized by Google

was decided. All his mental faculties were quickened, and an ingenious plan for making Julian uncomfortable was immediately conceived.

"Has Carfrae spoken again about his difficulties in the third and fourth acts?"

"Were there difficulties?"

"He was a little at a loss for incidents," said Cecil.

He thought ahead, and quickly decided upon what he was going to say. And, leaning back in his chair, crossing his knees, he began upon a tone of narrative; but all the time one part of him seemed to be holding aloof in keen apprehension.

"I heard a rather curious story the other day, and I thought I could tell George about it. It might be of interest to him, one never knows. . . . It is a true story, but it happened some years ago, in Russia, and people's memories are convenient; besides, it is known to only one or two people, so we can use it with impunity. A man"—he did not even know if she were listening—"an Englishman, took a house in Russia, in the country somewhere, for the summer, and a married couple with whom he was already intimate came to stay with him; charming woman, you understand. One day the husband came in from riding, and found a note for himself on the hall-table—I suppose they have such things in Russia. The note ran something like this: 'My dear Wolkonsky'—let us say it was Wolkonsky; Russians are generally called that—'permit me to have the pleasure of placing this house at your disposal for the remainder of the summer. The keys of the wine-cellar and cigar-chest are in the left-hand top drawer of my desk, and let me suggest that they be not entrusted to the butler; also that he might be encouraged to wear his felt shoes whenever on duty.' It is superfluous to add that the host had eloped with the man's wife."

Her eyelids lifted an instant, and when she said, "But that is very horrible"—without any emotion—he struggled with a horrible dizziness. He imagined the dramatic moment of telling her the name, but as he was

Digitized by Google

a man of fundamental common sense he did not forget that the consequences to Julian might be more unpleasant if he did not tell her. Julian, in all probability, if that instantly conceived, ingenious plan succeeded, and the incident got into the play, would not care to take the matter up, and would therefore never know of Cecil's share in it. But if he, Cecil, told Blanche point-blank, she might be angry with himself. He was driven hard to punish Julian, and when her beauty came to him like a stab, it spurred his jealousy and not his tenderness.

"Supposing you suggest to George that that story might look very piquant in the play?—he will take no suggestions from me, but he might from you, and the incident is excellent. The audience needs a little waking up—a modern touch here and there. George ought to think of his audience a little more, you know. Not that I would sacrifice Art, you understand; but George could make that incident Art."

He wondered what he would do if he found that again she was not listening, and his excitement began to show in his voice. But Blanche was listening, because it had suddenly come to her that the prospect of acting was not so distant and impossible as it had seemed.

"I act!" she thought, and her mind seemed to faint.

"Will you repeat that story to George?"

"The story you have just told me?"

"It is really excellent. Don't you think, for instance, it would fit in with the character of Greville? I always thought that third act too colourless, and so did George; and he could build on the story.... Will you remember, Mrs. Benwell? Supposing you write it down. I may seem very importunate, but I am very anxious. Would you mind if I dictated?"

He had the range of several sensations as he looked down at her and saw her finally take up a pen. He appreciated the dramatic quality in the fact she did not know it was Julian who had written the letter, and he also half envied that flamboyant villainy. He saw the curve of her cheek and the light on her hair, but he was

Digitized by Google

too afraid of what he was doing to abandon himself to the delight of artistic perceptions.

"You won't tell Carfrae that all this comes from me, I hope," he said, when she had written. "He is very obstinate—you know how obstinate he is. He is one of my best friends, but I confess he is obstinate. If you must tell him that this story comes through me, I beg you never to mention it at all."

"But if he asks me where I heard it?"

"Tell him you are not able to give any names. Will you promise me," he said, and he remembered her uprightness of soul with enormous relief, "that you will never say that the story came through me?"

He waited to see if she would say anything further, and just because she was silent he began to explain, and to stutter; but in the midst of his explanations he was interrupted by the entrance of the servant. The blowsy little maid looked in, pretended she had not known there was a visitor, clattered her brush and pan, and shut the door again. And he rose instinctively. For a moment, what he had done seemed so foolishly complicated, and yet so rash, that he did not think he could have done it.... Things had happened so unexpectedly that they seemed unreal. Then he tried to foresee what could happen further, and he tried to assure himself that everything was all right. But he had a pang of remorse as he took her hand. A long time seemed to pass; he felt he was going to know what to say, and yet before he was aware of it he had said good-bye.

His leave-taking had seemed immeasurably long to Blanche, but there had been none of the repulsion she had felt for him the day they sat in the convent garden. He was no longer sufficiently human to her to inspire it, and that she shrank from him on saying good-bye was because she suddenly sickened with the idea his face would change without warning before her very eyes and become hideous. She was tormented by nervous obsessions, and that was one of them, that at any second any face might grimace inhumanly and turn her to stone. After

Digitized by Google

Cecil had gone she continued to sit in her arm-chair, but watching the servant tidy the room made her tingle with fear, and when the girl started to dust the mantelpiece Blanche sprang up, for she felt that the girl would look round over her shoulder with a face she had never seen before. . . .

An inner trembling was making her ill; in her bedroom she cowered, hiding her face in her hands against the foot of the bed. Then, after a time, she grew calmer, and leaned back, feeling the sunlight upon her closed eyelids. For a few minutes she sat quite still, till suddenly a woman's voice called from the window of the floor above and the fear was startled into life again. Blanche felt that now the door was going to open and someone she had never seen was coming into the room; and she felt this with such terror that she was driven out on the landing.

The servant, having finished dusting the sitting-room, found Mrs. Benwell at the head of the stairs, and, after looking at her with suspicion, went into the bedroom. There was then nothing for Blanche to do but go back to the sitting-room, yet for a time she could not bring herself to open the door, she was so sure a stranger would be sitting in the chair by the fireplace. . . .

These accesses of fear left her so weak that, sitting in a chair, she lost all sense of time. Sometimes she would open her eyes to see if she were really alone, or to see where she was, in what chair she was sitting. Sometimes her immense consternation would cry out, and she would feel she must move; but the next moment she would ask herself what she could do if she moved. During long periods of exhaustion she would feel convinced she could never move again, and she would imagine people walking about her, speaking to her, or standing beside her chair. She would try to imagine what would happen if George came into the room and spoke to her at a time when no muscle was able to respond to her brain, and she was so afraid he was coming back that sometimes she actually heard him open the door.

Yet when someone came in, when Cecil had come, or

Digitized by Google

when the servant brought in her meals, nothing happened as she feared. She moved and spoke, and when she saw that no one found this strange, moving and speaking became natural to her again. Then, when she was alone once more, she would feel that, though she had answered and spoken that time, another time it would be impossible, and she would feel all her strength dissolving.

She had hardly any memory of the first days after Julian's departure, except of the moment when she stood still in the middle of the room and said aloud, "My confession!" That day Carfrae came to see her, and tried to persuade her to leave London, and as he talked to her she kept imagining Father Dudley's voice, and the words, "Ego te absolvo," falling on her ears. All the time at Heddenham she thought of her confession. And as she waited for Father Dudley in one of the Presbytery parlours she felt that with his entrance a new life would begin.

She was waiting for him, with her eyes fixed on the glass in the door, yet when she saw his figure emerge out of the shadows of the corridor she was surprised into a cry. He smiled at her from the threshold with a wonderful benignity and compassion, and held up his hand, as if to calm her emotion, or to bless.

"My child, I think I know why you have come."

She was on her knees before he had put on his stole, thinking she felt the burden already slipping from her heart. But after a few minutes there came a rush of inexplicable tears—tears that did not ease, but constricted her heart. She could no longer speak, and yet she tried to tell him more, and then, while she wept, she dimly perceived that she had no words left. She had told him the whole story in a few sentences, and when it was over she remembered that once there had seemed much more than that to be said. She had imagined a far longer, a far fuller, confession, and she had a moment of agony at the thought that the suffering she could not express would never feel the balm of his advice.

Her tears flowed more slowly. She waited for his

Digitized by Google

questions, but he asked her none, and a vague terror suddenly took form. "Father, am I making a full confession?"

"My child, you are becoming unnerved by the idea of sin. God does not wish us to be so crushed by our guilt that we cannot rise again and fight better."

His voice was as gentle as the approach of sleep at dawn after a night of fever, and she lifted her eyes, expecting to find peace; in her thoughts of God she had often had the priest's face before her mind. . . . He told her to make an act of contrition, but all the time she waited for something else; she seemed to expect even more than the "Ego te absolvo" which made her clean again.

"Even now, my child, you cannot expect entirely to control your brain and the impulses of your heart. You cannot control them just because you are convinced of their sinfulness. It will take time. They will continue to beset you. . . . And confession is not the climax of spiritual experience. It is also, in every case, a re-beginning."

She listened, and his words sank into her deep dismay. Yet what had she hoped? She forgot that she had ever hoped, and, passing into a state of resignation, she ceased to look for future help. It was strange, she had thought so much of her confession, so little of the beginning again. But submissively she accepted the idea of struggle. Her tears ceased and she raised her head—perhaps to catch the last gleam of a half-formulated thought—and then she covered her eyes with her hands and tried to lose herself in the contemplation of God's mercy, that had permitted her to leave a state of sin in which the fear of death had continually oppressed her.

She rose at last and stood upright, the long folds of her grey dress breaking over her feet. The priest rose too, continuing to speak earnestly, in a voice whose slight hoarseness was like the straining of an ardent conviction striving to make itself heard.

"There is an act of *hope* as well as an act of contrition,

Digitized by Google

my child. 'I *trust* that Thou will grant me forgiveness of my sins.' And now they are forgiven you. But you must not lose courage if you fail again. My dear child, you seem to forget that in this life we carry everywhere the limitations of our humanity with us."

She looked up at him once, and then bent her head as she began to draw on her gloves. The time had come for her to go. When she had entered the room half an hour before she had said to herself, "At last I am here!" and had never considered the moment when she must leave again. Now that the moment had arrived she thought perhaps it would be in solitude that she would most fully realize the mercy of God. While she stood with her head bent the priest could see only the line of her brows, and the tragic modelling of the orbits of her eyes and of her eyelids; it was that view of her face that remained with him to disturb him after she had left.

When she reached the street she was consumed with fear, and believed it was the fear of falling into fresh sins of thought. "I must hold my thoughts in check. I must keep my mind fixed upon God." But in the omnibus she could not fix her thoughts because of the row of faces opposite her. Her eyes tried to escape them, but could not; and while she shrank from eyes that met hers, those people who did not look at her seemed to be deliberately hiding something from her. She felt that they all knew about her. . . . And all at once she was seized with giddiness because the woman next to her was not saying a word, and she felt that she herself would have to speak in order to break the unnatural silence. When the woman got up with some abruptness, Blanche felt that that, too, was strange and unnatural, and she herself got out before it was time.

Her heart was beating to suffocation, and she wondered how she could get home. Then she thought of the silence of her room, and she hurried on, anticipating the moment when she would close the door and fall upon her knees. She ran upstairs as though she were expecting someone, and hastily, trembling, she threw open the door. But

Digitized by Google

she had thought so much of Julian in that room that the sight of the furniture reminded her only of him, and when she shut the door upon herself she seemed to lose consciousness and to die.

After that, life and thought lost all sharp values for her, and she did not realize that the fear of sin was fading out of her mind. She did not realize with what an effort she remembered to recite the prayers Father Dudley had given her as a penance. He had given her the *Psalter of Jesus* to say, one part a day. It was only on one occasion, on the third morning after her confession, that she understood the words she was saying, and then they created in her a kind of stupefaction. They seemed written especially for her.

"Deliver me from setting my heart upon any of Thy creatures, which may divert my eyes from continually looking up to Thee."

A little further was written:

"May the memory of Thy Passion and of those bitter pains Thou sufferedst for me sustain my patience, and refresh me in all tribulations and adversity. . . .

"Let no false delight of this deceitful world blind me, no fleshly temptations or fraud of the devil shake my heart.

"My heart, which has ever set up its rest in Thee, and is resolved to give up all things for Thy eternal reward." And she was penetrated with the righteousness of the words. Yet there was no fervour in her soul. She was convinced, not comforted, and when she sank into sensations of emptiness she often lost all consciousness of right and wrong.

That consciousness was awaked again by Carfrae because she knew he did not believe, but the flame of passion she showed him died down like a fire of straw, and left not as much as a trace in her memory. Then a few days after, while she stood at the window, she asked herself if any distance would seem too great for her to travel, even on foot, were she to meet Julian at the other end. She wondered if she would ever stop, ever pause,

Digitized by Google

with that hope drawing her on. . . . And suddenly darkness blotted out the picture. She saw the peril of her soul, and she got as far as the door, thinking she would start for the Oratory at once. But at the door her knees began to shake with physical weakness, a curious indifference came over her, and she went back to her chair.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIV

It was about a week or ten days after her confession that she met Carfrae in St. James's Park, and after choosing an empty bench they sat for a time without saying a word. His shoulders stooped with evident fatigue, and he narrowed his eyes as though they hurt him; he looked down at the ground he kept prodding with his stick, instead of up at the shadows on the grass, and the melting sky behind the trees which were already breaking into foliage.

As for Blanche, yielding to the relief of his presence was like leaning back and letting oneself dream, or like floating gently away upon a friendly tide.

"Has anyone been to see you since I was there?"

"Only Mr. Armathwaite."

There seemed to him a muffled quality in the afternoon sunlight, and in every sound that met his ears, the far-off continuous murmur of traffic, and nearer, differentiated sounds, of voices, the cooing of doves, and the quacking of the water-fowl being fed on the miniature river. The line of the trees against the sky was motionless and peaceful, yet the peace seemed to him more like a strange hesitation, a temporary lull between two storms. He was in harbour for a time, unable even to remember what the storm had been, but it seemed strange that here everything should be so richly quiet and still. And Blanche was sitting beside him again, unconscious of what he had done; he turned to look at her, trying to fix upon his memory a picture of her in her black jacket, her face half framed by its high Medici collar beneath the little hat trimmed with a bunch of violets. And as his eyes lingered on her face he wondered why he had never before been

Digitized by Google

grateful to her; for just to have her there beside him gave him a sort of right by proxy to the essentially romantic element in the scene before them, that, however marred by the town life around it, had, with its trees and its greensward, and in its deep shadows, something of a pastoral beauty.

"What have you been doing, George?"

"I've been writing."

"The play," she said vaguely.

"Did Armathwaite speak to you about your acting?"

"Yes."

"And what do you feel about that?"

"Am I not going to act?"

"That lies with you."

It was not the life of the stage that she suddenly apprehended, but her sitting-room at Mrs. Turner's; she remembered the servant shutting the door after taking away the breakfast things, and shutting in the long hours of the morning. The familiar feeling of terror seemed to be coming closer again; she looked at Carfrae, and in spirit she clung to him. But he was wondering if he had not better appeal to her on behalf of Mary.

"I will act as I said I would—if you will help me, if you think I can!"

"You won't have to act Helena now, if you were afraid of that. I have rewritten the play."

"Have you finished it?"

"Oh, my dear, it takes a little longer than that! I've finished a new scenario merely, yet I feel as though I had never stopped writing since I saw you."

"Coming back from Heddenham, you said you were never going to finish it."

He did not like being reminded of Heddenham and his original decision not to finish the play, but the atmosphere that afternoon was lush and dreamy, and difficult questions had no place in it. While he watched the people who were crossing the little bridge some way ahead of them, he suddenly felt that all this had happened before; and then he remembered that in the winter he and Blanche

Digitized by Google

had sat together in Kensington Gardens, as they were doing now. At first this seemed like the same incident transposed into another key, and then the vast difference came over him. He felt he was being drawn back into the stress and struggle, and the dreamlike atmosphere was rent like a veil. And from this new standpoint her nature seemed to have been as chill and undeveloped once as the bare trees whose outline he remembered against a white horizon. That described the other play too—chill and undeveloped. The stress and struggle of the new play had been the storm out of which he had drifted into this pastoral scene. . . . He remembered how she had nervously pushed up her veil, and how that harsh line had suddenly given her face an enigmatic expression that had startled him. That was the very first time he had been aware of any change in her. And he had explained it away by the accident of that hard, dark line above her brows.

Meanwhile, by some vagrant association she had been reminded of Cecil, and the story of the letter, with the words Cecil had dictated to her and which had fixed themselves in her mind, had rushed upon her out of the blankness of the past. With a return of her old obsession of fear she felt she ought to have told George even before, and she touched his arm.

"I heard a story the other day. It seemed so horrible."

"Tell me what it was."

"A man—he was English, but he was living in Russia—asked some friends of his, another man and his wife, to come and stay with him; he had a house in the country. One day the man, the woman's husband, came in from riding, and found a note from his host——"

She got a little confused, seeing him look surprised, as she had expected he would.

"It was the letter that was so horrible. It said: 'My dear Wolkonsky,—Let me have the pleasure of leaving my house to you for the rest of the summer. My keys are in the left-hand drawer of my desk, but let me suggest

Digitized by Google

that they should not be given to the butler, and that he be told to wear his felt shoes whenever on duty.' And then he found out——"

"That the other man had run away with his wife."

"But how do you know, George? Do you know the people?"

"What a coincidence!" Carfrae was saying.

"But why? What is there so strange?"

"You see," he said, turning to her—and he began talking with a new determination—"as I said, I've rewritten the play. Helena is no longer passive, no longer only an influence. She has become active too, yet the movement of the play is still brought about by her influence rather than her action—not so much by her activity as the activity of others influenced by her. All the same, she *lives* now."

He stopped.

"She lives," he repeated.

When he stopped again she glanced at him.

"You must tell me, George. I am going to act it."

"She lives, but she isn't made to be happy. Something comes between her and Greville. Greville is no longer her brother. She loves him."

He had dreaded this moment so much that he had not let himself think of it, therefore it seemed as if he had not known it would be so difficult. He hurried on.

"In the third act she discovers that Greville, in the past, had run away with somebody else's wife. That is the coincidence; that you should tell me your story now. . . . I hesitated before making use of that hackneyed sin, and I thought, perhaps, I could think of something better. But it hasn't a very important place in the play. It serves as a barrier—the barrier I needed, the reason of the struggle in Helena's soul."

As she slowly turned her face towards him he wondered if she would leave him any answer to make. She faced him fully now, but her glance did not accuse him. It dwelt long and searchingly on him, and then she looked away without having said a word.

Digitized by Google

He got up hastily. "Supposing I read you the scenario and let you judge for yourself. Could we go home now? We might stop at my rooms for the manuscript, and then go on to yours."

The picture that had seemed so dream-like for a time dwindled behind them, and they never once looked back, walking on absorbed in thought. Because he saw everything in the light of material for the play, Carfrae was weighing the value of the story she had just told him. The forced, self-conscious cynicism of the Englishman's letter had at once taken hold of his attention, and he had seen in it a resemblance to a certain school. How like a certain type of modern young man! His contempt was not so much for the crime as the effort that had been made to render it interesting. There was a certain type of young man who sought to distort life after the fashion of an Aubrey Beardsley drawing, and he wondered if Julian Eames would have laughed on being told of such a letter. If he could imagine Julian Eames laughing at the incident of the letter . . . but Carfrae knew he wouldn't actually laugh; he would listen with a mock attempt at keeping perfectly serious, an attempt that would cause far more amusement than open laughter. If he could imagine that, he could imagine Greville the hero of the incident. . . .

"But where did this happen?" he asked. "Is it a true story?"

"It really happened several years ago, in Russia. Only one or two people knew what happened, but it was not told me in confidence."

Because of the connection in which she had told him the story he had felt from the first that it concerned Cintra Ellison. But it occurred to him that it was unlike Blanche to repeat it.

"How did you get hold of it, Blanche?"

"It was told me."

"I know. As you say it was not told you in confidence, you could not tell me by whom?"

"No, not that."

Digitized by Google

He did not insist. He was seeing the letter fall into place in Greville's character, and, as always, when the play seemed to him to be advancing and shaping itself, the interest of it was like a draught of joy.

As they went upstairs together, through the soundless house, her hand slipping on the oak bannisters he liked so much, she showed a certain animation in hoping her room would be quite tidy to receive him. It was as though she were suddenly feeling the responsibilities of a hostess, and, on entering, she looked about her with a kind of expectancy. But he was anxious to get to his reading, and, being absent-minded, he asked her no questions.

"You must sit here," she said, pushing a chair towards the table. "Will you be comfortable?"

"This is perfect."

"But we will have to light the candles."

"Not yet, really. There is plenty of light."

"Are you sure it is all right?"

She hung up her hat and jacket behind the screen, and then came back, and, after lingering another moment, she sat down opposite him, and he took up the manuscript.

"I have changed my title," he said. "I've renamed the play *A Standard of Perfection*."

He broke off towards the end of the second act, full of uneasiness, but she rose quietly from her chair.

"It is too dark for you to read now," she said. "I must light the candles."

The pale flames wavered, changing the twilight of the room to an illusionary mistiness, through which his eyes sought the illumined reflection of the table and of himself in the cheval-glass that stood across the opposite corner. It was in the mirror that he saw Blanche go over to the window behind him and pull the curtains together. And as the oblong of pale day, that had so curiously stared upon the candlelight, was shut out, the candles burned more hardily; the dark walls seemed to

Digitized by Google

come closer, and, when Blanche had returned to her chair, to draw herself and him into a greater intimacy. But he felt no intimacy with her mind, for he had no idea what she was going to say.

"It was because of something Greville does that you said my story was a coincidence."

"Yes."

"Do you think you will bring the letter I told you of into the next act?"

"What made you think I would bring it in at all?"

She nearly told him about Cecil, and then remembered in time.

"I don't know; I had the idea all along."

"*Could* I use it, do you think? It would be very like Greville to write such a letter. But can I make that story public property?"

"It was not told me in confidence," she said, rather coldly, it seemed.

He thought for a moment, then took up the second act again, and, as he began to read, her eyes once more fixed themselves upon him.

She heard very little of what he read, but his voice kept away her tremors and giddiness, just as the candles kept away the dark. It kept away thought, for spasmodically the meaning of a sentence would dawn on her, and she would wonder about it. And each time he pronounced the name of Helena she heard it, and it lingered on her ears. That name had always had charm for her; the character, too, of Helena had drawn her—had alarmed her sometimes, but had never failed in charm for her. Helena . . . Vaguely, formlessly, the atmosphere of the early days of the winter came back to her. As she watched Carfrae's face oddly etched in the candlelight, she remembered the excitement in which she had gone home from the concert where they had met again. His first visits had been great events to her; when he asked her to act in his play she had been breathless. Then he had told her of the part he would give her, and it had become her first waking thought every morning. . . .

Digitized by Google

Those days seemed strange and remote, and, as it were, lit by a strange fire, like the light of a distant conflagration. When he paused at the end of the second act, before beginning on the third, she nearly cried out to him to wait, to talk to her, in the reaching of her whole nature towards companionship. And then she noticed that she was not listening. She tried to fix her attention, tried to grasp at the words when they passed her by like so many mere sounds. It was Helena speaking. It was a scene between Helena and her brother, her new brother, no longer Greville; they were talking about Greville, and what were they saying? Some sort of excitement came close to her, and she felt it suddenly, and, without knowing what it was, she grasped the arms of her chair. Was it George's voice, or something in the room, or was it merely her own heart beating? But there was a minute of incomprehensible suspense before Helena's defence of Greville startled her ears like a scream.

A wave of blood dyed her face scarlet, and she had the sensation of other waves passing over her and submerging her, so that in a few seconds she could think of nothing but how the room trembled as though it were at the bottom of the sea; the unfaltering voice was as faint as though it came down to her through fathoms of still, green water. The idea was as clear to her as a picture. The little voice said:

"'He seems to me a man who is strong in all the little virtues, and weak in all the big ones.'"

She thought, "I must lift my hands out of the water. They are growing cold."

After a time she lifted them from the arms of her chair, and the sensation of the bottom of the sea receded. She listened, and nothing that he said seemed to concern her any more. It was as though he had thrust himself between herself and Helena, for she had been aware of Helena as one might be of a presence in a dark room. She might have compared it to a spectral apparition in what one believes to be a mirror, when it is so dark that the eyes perceive only a form, a sort of paleness. . . .

Digitized by Google

He finished reading, and nothing actually had happened. But as he laid down his manuscript he met her eyes, and in a long look they exchanged questions and answers that were never put into words. She held his gaze without flinching with what seemed a wonderful dignity, before slowly sinking back into her chair.

In the candlelight her skin seemed almost opalescent, with the shadow deepest under her chin, which gave it a certain prominence, throwing it up a little. . . . For the first time in his life he seemed able to lose himself in looking at her, and while trying to read her eyes he felt he must draw back or lose his balance.

"What is the matter, George?"

Her voice was animated, as it had been when they first entered the room, and he was again surprised, for he could not guess that this animation was due to her desire to keep him with her, and postpone her solitude as long as she could.

"I am going to act that, all that you have written. I am not dreaming," she said incoherently. "When is it to be?"

"We don't yet know if it will be accepted. If it is, perhaps we can push it through in six weeks."

"I know it will be accepted. And then when will rehearsals begin?"

"If . . . as soon as I have finished the play. In three weeks or so, perhaps."

"Rehearsals will begin in three weeks or so——"

She flushed again, and whispered:

"What will I have to do?"

"Only what I tell you, and so simple——"

"I thought I understood, but I never did, never till this moment, that it was really going to happen. But at that moment——"

"I, too," he said, deeply shaken. "I realized it then for the first time."

Digitized by Google

He began to walk up and down. The situation had entirely shifted, and she exclaimed: "Show me now. Let me see . . . are you sure I will be able to learn ?"

He turned, to see her grasping the edge of the mantelpiece, and when she pushed back her hair from her forehead he saw her on the stage, making a gesture of despair.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXV

LATE one hot evening in June Carfrae was standing in the wings alone, wondering when the rehearsal would be over. Miss Buchanan, Miss Whitridge, and Mr. Orme had stayed on to repeat an isolated scene in the fourth act, and Conway was on the stage with them. The author was watching for an opportunity to speak to him before going home with Blanche, and he was so tired that everything worried him, and that she might be ready to go before he could get hold of Conway seemed a question of real importance to him. He was also worried by what she would say when he told her Conway had decided the production could be fixed for the twentieth of June.

They had got on with it exceptionally fast, but it had meant so much work that even he had grown tired; even for him the work had lost its savour. He knew the enterprise was doomed to failure, and on that evening he had reached a degree of mental depression when he felt he did not care if it were; indeed he was thinking that, if it succeeded, success would not be worth the labour and heartache it had cost.

He had set out with too many theories; that was it; he had known too definitely what he wanted, and therefore had laid himself absurdly open to disappointment. The play had been so much a part of himself that he had started with an abnormal sensitiveness that was bound to get hurt. By this time it was a good deal blunted, and, perhaps it was in consequence, the play no longer meant to him what it had. He did his best for it, but instead of it being a very part of his brain and soul it was now a mere routine, a sort of daily battleground. And

Digitized by Google

it seemed as if the same change had been worked in Blanche, and just lately he had wondered if in her, too, something had not been blunted; not her fineness or her moral sensitiveness, but her power to get hurt and her capacity for receiving impressions. It was because of this, no doubt, that she had almost outgrown her stage-fright. She was no longer easily upset; she could take criticism, even pass over the evidences of disapproval and ill-will, and in all this was not so much like a delicate organism that has become sturdy, as like one that has drawn into itself, and presents a hardening exterior to contact from the outside.

A strange thing was how little he seemed able to judge her performance. He nearly always had a lifting of the heart when he saw her on the stage, but he wondered if other eyes would see her as he did. He felt that at moments she must seem stiff, ill at ease, and shy without a reason, while in the third act she might lack dramatic power. From that weakness in the third act he saw at once what his delusion had been. He had thought she could live her whole life in four acts during one evening, whereas she acted the whole play according to one mood. To her, as to him, the play had, for the time being, ceased to be personal. In the third act she was very much as in the first; she never recaptured that passionate moment she once had shown him. Her whole reading of the part was, therefore, sometimes tired, sometimes nervous, again very touching and appealing, almost invariably, as he found, corresponding to one mood. For there were days when he found her listless and indifferent, others when he knew she had been weeping, while sometimes she was so restless that she could hardly sit still. She could speak, then, of nothing but the play, could not relax even physically, and confessed to sleeping badly. It seemed as though these must be the signs of some emotion, but though he tried to understand her emotional life and her attitude to the past he could not, for she never confided in him again. And he had begun to think that the hard work and the excitement of her

Digitized by Google

new life stifled at times both emotion and memory; and as she never spoke of Father Dudley or of going to the Oratory, he wondered if even her religiousness were not undergoing another phase.

While he stood in the wings, looking through the window of the " set " into a stage-room where tired, heat-bedraggled comedians were endeavouring to produce the effect of a crisis of alarm, he was, being very reasonable by nature, trying to reason away his excessive heaviness of spirit. It was the personal element in the business that had depressed him that day. These actors were not only the vehicles of his art, they were men and women whose private limitations had become immensely important in the daily life of the theatre. The production of his play had meant finding a path through a very maze of prejudices, jealousies, and superstitions. Conway might make an excellent Greville, but he was also a man with whom Carfrae had come into collision only that afternoon. For instance, his theory that stage-scenery should but indicate a background was tenacious and in direct opposition to Conway's. As to his theories about acting, he had soon felt it was useless to expound them. He was content to be grateful that Miss Buchanan was clever in the part of Anna, and that Conway was so handsome; also that the actor-manager left Blanche entirely to his, Carfrae's, direction. Yet, on the other hand, the whole company's resentment towards Blanche just for that reason, that she was protected by the author and Cecil Armathwaite, was very hard to bear, even though she herself was becoming less and less impressionable. Carfrae was in the position of hating Cecil's attentions to her, hating the fact he was designing her dresses, and being angry that Conway had not yet begun to like her, and treated her still with a cold deference. Conway would not even pronounce upon her acting.

Two stage-hands who were working after hours broke into his silence and solitude with a heavy piece of furniture. They set it down near where he was standing, and as they paused to wipe their foreheads he spoke to them.

Digitized by Google

"This heat is unusual, fortunately," he said.

"I wouldn't grumble at a bit of cooler weather myself, sir," answered one of the men.

His streaming face made Carfrae realize over again how hot and breathless it was behind the scenes, and he felt he must at all costs get away. And he wondered if it were really necessary to speak to Conway, but, forcing himself to a decision, he sent the stage-manager to ask if he were needed. Conway wished to see him, and there was another talk, while the people on the stage sank back for a brief rest. Miss Buchanan, who wore cherry colour in her hat, took out a little fan and began to fan herself. Carfrae caught her eye as he went away, but she did not smile at him. He had evidently done something to make her angry.

It was just another little evidence of the eternal little discords that reigned, and it was ridiculous of him to notice; and then he saw that Blanche was standing in the wings, from which the stage-hands had departed. He stopped to look at her, and he said to himself: "But we're together in it all!"

Her whole bearing showed fatigue, and in the heat her smooth, white skin had taken a sort of luminosity, like the polish of ivory. He would have liked to have continued to gaze at her, but she caught sight of him and asked him if he were ready, and they left the theatre at once.

He felt extraordinarily close to her; they were more companionable now than they had ever been, and a sadness that was no longer bitter rose up in his throat. The warm twilight streets were quiet and deserted just behind the Westminster Theatre. For a few minutes he and she met no one. He heard the irregular tapping of her parasol on the pavement, and felt her lassitude, yet it filled his mind with poetic suggestions. And the faint lavender mist veiling the farther end of the street, the deep purple in the shadows above the level of the lamps, between them and the lane of dove-coloured sky overhead, seemed the perfect setting for her slow, thoughtful

Digitized by Google

steps. Then they came suddenly into a crowded thoroughfare, and the movement on the pavement drew them together. When he tried to speak, the surge of noise, like a high wind, took the words out of his mouth, and he noticed the same effect with the voices of the people passing—that they were as if blown from side to side and quickly lost.

"We're on the brink of our enterprise, Blanche. And we should feel all the excitement of that, of being on the brink of events. We're a *part* of all this, not only looking on. I've looked on so much in my life, and I know that when one is a *part* of a scheme the world is much more thrilling. I felt this much more when we started—but no, I feel it still. I will always feel it."

As he guided her through the crowd she looked up into his face. Immediately he found it easy to talk.

"It isn't in the midst of infinite leisure that one has most the spirit of adventure; at least, that's the way with me. It's when I can take my leisure only in snatches that I feel adventurous. Not only that, I wouldn't feel I had a right to these streets if I weren't doing something for the public. Think how splendid it is that we are as busy as they look! It's because of that that I feel the sort of recklessness there is . . . but I'd rather walk with you in one of those little squares, where the London summer is so languid."

She did not answer.

"We must remember just this as wonderful, Blanche. We'll always remember how it was when we opened the theatre door to-night. That dark courtyard! And the thick, motionless trees."

Something had changed his mood completely. Then, all at once, he knew he was unutterably sad.

"You are done up," he said to her.

"You bird with a broken wing," he wanted to say, "it's as though one saw you trailing your wing in the dust."

Digitized by Google

He felt her wounded spirit and strove against the knowledge. And at the same time it was their melancholy that was so close a bond between them.

He still went to rehearse her, at about half-past nine on most mornings, those days she was not due at the theatre before eleven o'clock; she was never satisfied with herself, and wanted him continually with her to reassure her. On foot it took ten minutes from his lodgings to hers, but the morning after their evening walk he did the distance in five, and he did not realize he was almost running. While waiting for the door to be opened he remembered the past weeks, and he thought that every morning he had stood upon her doorstep he must have felt impatient. The door opened, and he went upstairs two steps at a time.

Blanche's sitting-room was empty; it was not yet half-past nine. Sunlight was flooding in, and the window, wide open to the air, drew him irresistibly. He was leaning out when the door behind him was suddenly opened. Blanche had come in with an effect of suddenness that was extraordinary, and then in a moment she had closed the door again, without a word. What amazed him, too, was the white scarf that was closely bound about her head, hiding her hair and changing her whole expression, the whole aspect of her face. As she stood with her back to the door, he had time to see in that white line above her brows a resemblance to the forehead band of a nun.

"I have been helping," she said, quickly unwinding it. She took a step towards him, and said without further preliminary:

"My husband is dead."

Carfrae made neither sign nor sound. . . .

"I found the letter from his solicitors waiting for me when I got home last night. He died in South America nearly two months ago, and they took all this time to find me because he and I had not been in communication for four years. But there were instructions in his will that I should be told. That is all," she said, as if someone had

Digitized by Google

stopped her short, for she was surprised that her story should already be over. "He left no money."

Carfrae had several moments of absolute disbelief, as well as an inadequate resentment. He began to resent this news because it was completely unexpected, and had never occupied his imagination for as much as an instant. Because he had never anticipated it, he almost felt it could not be true.

"He died two months ago!" she said in a tone of wonder. "He died in Easter week—in Easter week!"

This was different. He knew what lay behind that—"He died in Easter week"—and he found himself instantly and bitterly hostile to her.

"When you heard he was dead, couldn't you give one thought to the feeling you had for him once? Couldn't you remember, just for one moment, just one hour of happiness, one moment of—of love? It seems to me one could at least mourn the death of that feeling when one heard of the death of the person——" He broke off, and turned away from her. Coming back to her side, he added: "Surely one could be capable of tenderness for that feeling! Tenderness for the memory of it, after death had removed the bitterness of what went between——" He stopped again.

"Capable of regret!" he said.

He saw no response in her face, though she was listening to him.

"Did you never love him, even for a moment?" he asked.

She was silent.

"Why did you marry him?"

"He said all his happiness lay in my hands, and I did not think I had the right to make him unhappy."

"Tell me——"

"Why—why? Why remind me—why do you want to know? He left me in less than a year . . . and during nearly all that time I thought he was insane. But, thank God, he was hardly ever with me. Then, after six months, he wanted me to divorce him, for he wanted to

Digitized by Google

be free. He had been, as I thought, converted; he had become a Catholic before we married, but that, too, was a blasphemy. He left the Church again, he said from conviction. I got a legal divorce because he wished it; he threatened me, and they advised me, and I thought it was right. There was a Protestant . . . and according to her conscience she could marry him. I never saw him again. And you ask me if I regret——"

His heart was once more at her feet.

"Blanche, I didn't understand!"

"You even said that one ought not to be expected to stand by the mistakes one had made—that mistake, I mean, of marriage. It's often an innocent one, I think—I've thought that. I believe you wanted me to take happiness when I knew it to be a sin, and now you ask me if I regret. . . . It seems to me," she said, "a strange contradiction!"

"Perhaps it is not in man's power to be logical about a woman," he answered.

He took the tattered roll of the third act out of his pocket and threw it on the table. He did not know what he was doing.

"This has happened, but the rehearsals must go on just the same. We've got our 'call' for this morning. The theatre—Conway . . . but only for a little longer now!" He put the third act back into his pocket.

"At least, we can give ourselves a part of a holiday," he said. "We needn't work till we have to."

She was deep in thought, standing by the table with her head a little bent.

"I don't exist," he thought. "It is no longer in my power to give her a moment of pleasure—or more than a moment of pain, for that matter."

As he took up his hat he asked her—and he could not prevent the coldness of his voice—when she would be at the theatre.

"Not till a quarter past eleven to-day."

She put her hand up to her face.

"Then Cintra Ellison is going to lunch with me, and

Digitized by Google

afterwards I have an appointment at the dressmaker's. Cintra wrote the other day and asked me to come and see her, and we arranged——"

"I'll see you at the theatre, then," he replied, and he bade her a formal good-bye.

When he left the room, he saw by the clock that he had been there only a quarter of an hour.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXVI

It was the last week before the production, and the confusion at the theatre was extreme—that confusion which often reigns just before an organization is complete, and then, with professionals, suddenly and miraculously clears. The work of the author and the actor-manager, already heavy, was complicated into the bargain by Cecil's incessant interference and his nagging reiterations that they could not possibly be ready in time. The date of the production had been fixed for Tuesday, the twentieth of June, and for a week or two before that there was not a rehearsal at which Cecil was not present; and whenever anyone would listen to him—actor, author, or manager—he would buttonhole him, and say in a confidential undertone: "Look here, my dear fellow, are we merely optimistic or mad?"

One day at luncheon-time Carfrae saw that Armathwaite was following him, and he paused to let the other man catch up.

"George," Cecil began, but instead of the usual, "While I was in the wings this morning," he fulfilled Carfrae's expectation, and said: "When did she tell you that her husband was dead?"

"A few days ago."

"Strange she didn't tell me the first—that, in fact, I found it out by accident! How do you think Conway knew?"

Carfrae shrugged his shoulders. It was coming, he supposed. He did not know what, but he looked at Cecil as he had done once before, as though Cecil could be treated like a human being. He looked at him aggressively. . . . But Cecil's excitement over her free-

Digitized by Google

dom had already had time to expend itself, and to Carfrae's stupefaction the conversation changed. That morning Conway had retorted irritably when he, Cecil, had made his usual objection that they could not be ready in time, and Cecil had been hurt in his pride, which was the pride of never deserting an Olympian, ironic calm. He had been caught out of his rôle, so to speak, and that touched him on the raw; and so, deeply mortified that Conway should have thought him amateurish and nervous, he began to explain to Carfrae why he had spoken to Conway as he did. He was interrupted by the ruthlessness of the traffic, and just before they were separated by a heavy dray Carfrae exclaimed that he must hurry on; so Cecil was left standing alone on what was like a dry space in an eddy of waters.

Armathwaite was no more to be considered than a fly. He need think of no one else till Julian came.

That last week he did not go to rehearse her at her lodgings, and they met only at the theatre. For a week they had not seen each other alone, and suddenly one afternoon he felt he could wait no longer. She had gone off the stage; he could not find her in the wings, and that sense of being on the very edge of events came suddenly to a crisis. While he was looking for her he saw Orme coming towards him, mopping his forehead, and he thought Orme must be coming to tell him something. Orme stopped to say a few words, and Carfrae found himself waiting to hear; and when he realized that Orme had nothing to say of any importance he did not know what to answer. He went on, down the corridor bearing at intervals the legend " Silence," that led to her dressing-room, and at last he heard her voice bidding him come in.

She half-rose from the lounge on which she was sitting, but when she saw him she sank back again. His first impression on entering was of the subdued yellow glare of the drawn blinds that seemed to give colour and substance to the heat in the room.

" Oh, George ! it is you. Come in, and I will give you some tea."

Digitized by Google

He went over to the little wicker table beside the lounge, and looked down at her, not even replying to her invitation. The brown earthenware teapot seemed almost too heavy for her to lift, but just then it did not suggest itself to him to help her. Her hand in its close cuff, bending under the weight it carried, was long, the fingers extraordinarily slender, though not exactly tapering, as the first joint was as thin as the third, like the hands in Florentine pictures. "There is not a flaw in her beauty," he thought, "or is it only that I think so?"

He took note of every detail—of how she had thrown aside her hat, and how her hair, drawn back at the sides of her head, escaped wherever it could into loose rings. The little curls along her forehead were damp from the heat of the footlights, and clung to her temples, and he noticed again that faint luminosity that was like a pale, delicate surface to her skin.

After he had studied her for a few minutes he looked around the room, a narrow room, not very large. He saw that her personality had made no impression upon it, and that it would not have looked differently if it were still uninhabited. On the big dressing-table lay only a brush and comb, and she had not yet tried to decorate her bare walls. Yet she was leading lady in one of the best theatres in London. Strange incongruity!

There was a piece of thin bread-and-butter on her plate, and he decided that when she had finished playing with it he would break the pause; but it became more and more impossible to speak, and the room seemed full of the enormous fact of her freedom. Her husband's death pervaded the air, as well as every second of the long pause, and the thought of her past began to appear in a terrible curiosity. Her past with her husband, and the years about which she would never speak, and all the things that she could never, even if she wished, put into words, made her all at once as mysterious as the sphinx to him, and the mysteries hidden in the incommunicability between human beings were like a burden.

"How noiselessly life can stage-manage itself!" he

Digitized by Google

said aloud. "Think of a fortnight ago! And yet everything that has happened seems quite natural now. . . ."

Soon he was called away, and at once he began to be haunted by the thought that he had left her without an expression of sympathy. . . . Then, when he pushed open the swing-door, that sense of something impending, imminent, came over him again with a rush. It made him give an inner gasp, though it was Conway's familiar, business tones that he heard—("Strike those panels, please, Williams; what is the matter over there?")—as the door opened, and as he found himself among the company, the scene-shifters, and the furniture of the second act. But these were only the supers, this was the stage scenery, and soon all of it was to be relegated to a background for the principals of the piece.

Conway, picturesque in a gentlemanly dishevelment, but prickly to deal with, Cecil, struggling with pride and manner, the rest of the cast, they receded, leaving the centre of his mind doggedly held by the idea of his play. He picked his way back to the stalls, and as he heard the first words of the second act his feeling of proprietorship, reawakened after such a long unconsciousness, was so intense it was like anger. It was his play, and as Art it was good, even though in real life events were marching, even though Julian might at that moment be waiting for her at her house. It was not his fault that he was behindhand again, for life moved so quickly he could not possibly keep up with it.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXVII

It was not the death of Blanche's husband that brought Julian back to England, for he did not hear of it till he got home. And he returned with the intention of staying only a short time, just to make certain necessary arrangements before starting off once more on a journey to Norway and Sweden with another man.

But the sight of London revived all his memories, and, driving home from the station on a warm grey evening, he expected to see her in every woman he met. When he awoke next morning the idea that he was once more in the same town with her was poignant, both the joy and the pain were so great. All the same, he persisted in not wishing to see her, for it would be terrible to see her. He told himself it would rend his very soul. He was jealous, too, for the memory of the most exalted moment of his life.

Though he was not going to meet her, he had not been in London twenty-four hours before he had found out what she was doing. His way of finding out was asking about Armathwaite, and on his second evening he dined with a young man quite famous for his successful inquisitiveness, who knew for a fact, which most people didn't, that Armathwaite was financing Gordon Conway's new play—a new play by a new author, with a new actress in it, coming out almost immediately, in fact, within a week or two. One asked at once, Who was the actress? And Savile Gurney knew that some people said she was secretly married to Conway, others that he had discovered her bare-foot in a fishing-village off the coast of Ireland, others, more shrewdly, that she was going to marry Armathwaite. At any rate, no one had ever seen her

Digitized by Google

before, and while he neatly blended report with conjecture he found an excellent listener in that "odd, foreign sort of fellow, Eames."

Behind his look of close attention Julian was exceedingly disturbed. He had somehow never believed that Blanche was going on the stage, and he did not know if he were furious, or merely excited, or in a certain way pleased. He did not know, even, if he wanted her to succeed. Certainly he did not want her to fail, but as a successful actress she would become remote to him, for he would become obscure in comparison to her. A woman must be convinced of a man's worldly importance to be in love with him; that was one of Julian's theories. If she become a public personage and he does not, he may easily sink in her estimation; it was his first deduction. And, then, another thing: other people, hundreds of people, would become familiar with the sight of her beauty, with the sound of her voice, with all her little characteristics of manner, and did he wish it? Wouldn't he prefer to have her, the memory of her if he couldn't have herself, belong only to him, able to live in no one else's memory—prefer that, even, to having his taste justified by the admiration of other people showered upon her? He had a few minutes of jealousy when he thought of other men merely looking at her. But perhaps he was still more jealous of the demands this new life might make upon her imagination, which he was sure was, for the time being, dominated entirely by him.

It was Sunday morning, and he had again met Savile Gurney at the club. After half an hour's gossiping Gurney suggested they should take a stroll in the Park, and they left the pleasantly shaded room hazy with smoke, and came out into the sunlight of Piccadilly. An unbroken stream of carriages at Hyde Park Corner was pouring into the Park, and just inside people lingered on the kerb to notice the horses, as well as the occupants of the victorias and landaus. Hyde Park was far more intimate in those days—days some of whose customs are now as obsolete as the fashions of that year, when

Digitized by Google

women wore small hats tilted into a straight line across their brows, and trimmed with stiff, upstanding sprays of flowers; skirts were full and draped, and the width of the sleeves emphasized the smallness of the feminine waist. Hyde Park was like a garden with one charmed circle in which everyone knew each other—between the brilliant flower-beds on one side, and the glossy rhododendrons under the thick trees, moving to the rhythmic sound of well-appointed carriages perpetually passing.

Hard upon this news of Blanche Julian had been charmingly welcomed over and over again, and as he talked to his companion the bright scene seemed incomparably amusing, at moments actually enchanting. It amused him to talk and to feel himself acting a part, and he felt that if he stayed on in London life would be a continual comedy. But the second after he had thought of life as a comedy he told himself that if he stayed in London it would be to see Blanche, himself unseen, at the theatre. Yet, could he really endure to see her act ?—waiting for the curtain to go up, and wondering if she would succeed or fail ! He remembered the day she recited at Mrs. James's, when he was introduced to her in the back drawing-room, between the fading light of the window and the lighted lamp on a little round table, and the past, as it rolled back upon him, seemed wonderfully beautiful and sad.

Savile Gurney had asked him to dinner for the Thursday following, and they went on to the opera for a second act; after that they dropped in at the club, and it was there that Julian began again about Conway. Gurney had heard for certain that Conway's affair with Mrs. Morgan was still " on," though perhaps not as much so as it had been in the winter, for " poor old Gordon " had had other things to think about lately—money worries, and that sort of thing. His last two plays had been such dismal failures !

" Of course, I don't know him very well," he said, as he had said on Sunday. " But Thompson does. I've just heard that Thompson is going to the dress-rehearsal

Digitized by Google

of this new play. Conway always asks Thompson's advice, you know, but I notice that it's usually when it's too late to take it!"

"Has Thompson met the author, do you happen to know—George Carfrae?"

"I've an idea he has, or is it Temple? Yes, it's Temple—told Thompson he was a tall, silent, rather stupid-seeming chap, if I remember right. Temple is another tremendous friend of Conway's, and he's been to an ordinary rehearsal of this play. He told Thompson it was good, and a little Ibsenesque. But Thompson says that everything that's lugubrious, with no clothes or society in it, reminds Temple of Ibsen."

"I wonder if I could get in to the dress-rehearsal, too. I may be leaving town on Tuesday, and as I know Carfrae I should like to see the play."

"I could ask Thompson, and he might manage it. I know Conway isn't as severe as some actor-managers. If you like, I'll ask him about you, and let you know. Oh, by the way, I've heard something about Conway's leading lady. You asked about her, didn't you? Her husband has just died, and she hasn't gone into mourning for him."

It was in this way that Julian heard of her freedom. The shock was indescribable. When the room and Gurney's face grew clear to him once more, it was like seeing the light again on coming up after a long dive. He moved his head with difficulty, seemed to find his own hands in some way unfamiliar.

"Are you sure her husband is dead?" he said to Gurney.

"I am sure of what Thompson told me. He told me only the day before yesterday."

Gurney's observation was almost unendurable. He could not think. Blanche's husband was dead, and there was a period for him of unreal laughter, of smoking and talking, while curiously moving, sharply cut, black-and-white figures interfered with the immense importance of his thoughts. She was free, and as he tried to talk back to Gurney he knew—"I can go to Crookby's to-morrow."

He took another cigarette. Gurney offered him a light,

Digitized by Google

and he fixed all his attention upon it. It seemed to be at the moment of fixing his eyes on the little flame that he asked himself: "And what then?" But it was later, while he was letting himself into his flat with his latch-key, that he saw a little way into the desolation that had so suddenly overtaken him. It was an ideal that was being threatened, and it seemed as though he did not wish to acknowledge, even to himself, that it was in danger.

He had expended a great deal of time and thought upon the arrangement of his room, and it struck him that evening as more beautiful than he had quite known; also, in its emptiness and silence there was a great dignity. As he stood on the threshold, looking at it, he felt that here, at last, he could know himself, and then the club, Gurney who had told him, and the other men, relapsed into vulgarity and trivialness; to have heard of her husband's death in such a way degraded their story and his emotions. He felt he would never quite get rid of that memory of inadequacy, that it would always haunt him with a horrible distaste.

In his deep arm-chair he clasped his hands above his head, but the thought of the club and of the trivial way in which he had been told persisted in an extreme irritation. He remembered how a waiter had spilled the coffee . . . and then without any transition he remembered the evening when he had packed to go abroad. "I loved her;" and he saw that his love had been an ideal to him; it had given him an ideal of himself. He wanted to love her. To love and renounce as he had done had raised his whole life to a higher plane, and the longing for her had, even in the beginning, easily changed to joy that he was capable of something so disembodied and pure. And he had felt more and more as the longing grew more intermittent that it had been far better, it had been inexpressibly better, to lose her than to have her, in whatever way. It would have been so easy to lose her in having her. He became convinced that he would have lost her spirit in a single kiss, whereas, as it

Digitized by Google

was, it was impossible to lose her, for there was never to be a disillusion. None of his other loves had ever satisfied his own conception of how he ought to be capable of loving; but after he left Blanche, imagining how he would review his life when he was old, he imagined himself thinking: "Among the many adventures there was *that*. . . ." As though his love had been a sort of achievement, in this case an unfinished sketch that was the artist's masterpiece.

And now he saw his love assailed most cruelly by disillusion, not only menaced by the one that might attend a meeting with her, but by the disillusion of knowing that, though he could go to her, he was not ready to fly to her at once. He saw it cruelly clearly, and as if he wished to escape that implacable clearness his mind seemed to slip; he slipped into a kind of oblivion. He came to himself again with a violent start, and, half getting up, he said aloud: "What ought I to do?"

Not only might he in his duality of feeling expect something from himself, but she would certainly expect it, and in a way he was afraid of her. Inexplicably he was afraid of failing *her* ideal; she had established that much hold on him. She had established an extraordinary hold, for he was actually afraid of his own cynicism. He was horribly afraid of becoming cynical about his love for her.

He sank back in his chair, and he sat for a time without moving, in a stillness that resembled that of old age, the contemplation of age. His well-shaped hands were placed one on each arm of the chair, and the lamp beside him, its light falling on the white shirt-front set in the blackness of his evening clothes, detached his figure sharply from the austere tones of the rest of the room. He sat for a time without thoughts, till, aware that he must come to some decision, he looked around him, and wondered if in the past there had not been something analogous to this situation that might act as a guide to what he should feel and do now. But nothing like this had ever happened before. And then he thought how strange that Blanche

Digitized by Google

Benwell should have come into such a life. Supposing, as though she had entered a dwelling, she could look around her! Supposing he shared his life with her, what would it be like? Would she condemn him? But all of a sudden he could think only of love. He could imagine her only loving, he could see her only as she had been the afternoon at Crookby's, radiant with love. As though he were suddenly inspired with strength he sprang up; but there was nothing to be done just yet. He leaned on the table, and after a moment or two began to wonder what time it was. Perhaps outside it was already dawn, but he did not have the will to go and see; his mind seemed all of a sudden empty. . . . He took up the lamp, and as he went to the door he thought only of the moment when he would stretch himself out and lose himself in sleep.

But all night long she was in his mind, whether he dreamed of her, or, waking, thought of her, or, half awake, saw her with the clearness of a waking vision in the impossible situations of dreams. Only towards morning did he fall into a real sleep, and he woke late, with a start, wondering what had happened. When he remembered he paused in the act of getting out of bed, and he remained for a time leaning on his elbow, thinking how much he wanted to see Crookby's shop again. He thought of it all that day, and in the course of Saturday morning he made up his mind that he would pay it a visit—and yet it was not with the idea of meeting Blanche. It was only to see the place once more, just because it was so clear in his memory, so immensely significant. What he was to do afterwards he did not know; if he were to meet Blanche he would believe in Destiny. When he thought of meeting Blanche his imagination failed; but she was sure to be at the theatre. As Tuesday was the first night, he supposed the company were at rehearsal most of every day. And yet he was more deeply excited than merely going to Crookby's could explain, and at moments he seemed to suspect himself of other thoughts, as though

Digitized by Google

he were suspecting another person. He decided he would go to Crookby's after lunch, and he had lunch at home; he could not eat for looking at the clock. He had decided he would leave the house at three, and then, after lunch, when he saw how quickly he had smoked two cigarettes, he asked himself why he should not start at a quarter to three. What could he do from now till three o'clock? He was smoking his fourth cigarette when he heard a knock and a ring, and in a few moments his servant brought him a telegram. He felt as though he had been waiting for this. But when he tore open the envelope he saw "Gurney" written at the bottom of the flimsy sheet: "Met Thompson he says you may go to rehearsal Monday he will meet you Westminster Theatre three o'clock."

Did it help him in any way? There were two whole days from now till three o'clock on Monday. There might never be a Monday. There might be a Monday so extraordinary that he would never see Thompson at all. He stood looking at the clock.

The sun had gone in, and it was an odd, milky day, less hot than the previous week had been. From his hansom he saw the towers of Westminster against the low, thick sky, and he leaned forward to see as much of the Abbey as he could; in Whitehall he noticed the clanking of the heavy harness of the omnibuses. There was the smell of asphalt and dust in the air; the streets were crowded. Then all at once he saw that the hansom was turning into Farawell Street. . . . The man drew up, and Julian jumped out, only to look about him in amazement. There was no window full of books at the corner, no tressle of books on the pavement. Yet it was the corner! He knew it well—he could not be mistaken—and there were the old gabled fronts that marked the place so unmistakably. The other shops down the street were open. But where Crookby's window had been there were closed shutters, and the two rows of windows above, like eyes, were all darkened. The place was shut up.

He went slowly back to his hansom.

"The place I meant seems to be shut up," he said. He

Digitized by Google

felt the cabman ought to know, ought to be able to advise him, but the man looked quite unsympathetic. Julian paid him, and then continued to stand, gazing at the blank, blind front of the old shop where so much had happened to him. He was almost appalled by finding it shut up, for he could not conceive of any simple explanation as to why it should be. A sort of superstitious dread was on him, and at first he could not make up his mind to go round to Mrs. Turner's and inquire. When he did, he found that the blinds of the house were down. He saw it with part of his attention, while with the other he saw that he was sealing his fate; he knew he was going to come face to face with Blanche, and when he heard the door opening he steadied himself to meet her. The door opened, and a little maid in a black dress appeared before him.

"Why is Crookby's shop shut up?" he asked.

"Mr. Crookby died at four o'clock yesterday morning," said the servant.

"And Mrs. Benwell," he said at last—"is she still here?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Benwell left last night. She's gone to other lodgin's—but I forgits the nime, sir. Something like 'Awsmith . . . Awsnips. . . . Something Plice, sir. I forgits exactly."

"Poor Crookby!" said Julian vaguely. He looked vaguely at the little servant. "I'm sorry. It's quite a shock to me. I liked him. Will you tell——" He remembered that nobody there knew him. "No matter. Good-bye."

He had turned away, and then he looked back.

"Do you know what's going to happen to the shop?"

"No, sir."

"Good-bye," said Julian again.

He did not go to the stage door, for he was afraid of meeting, above all, Blanche, and then in a lesser degree Carfrae. Meeting Conway, too, would be difficult. He went up to the big doors on the thoroughfare, and stopped

Digitized by Google

for a moment before the placards, on which *A Standard of Perfection* was printed in very big letters, and *By George Carfrae* in quite small ones. Yet he remembered the title as *Catherine Place*. Why had they changed it? In big letters he saw "Mr. Gordon Conway presents *A Standard of Perfection*," and on other placards he read, "Mr. Gordon Conway and Miss Blanche Benwell." Across them all were pasted small red bills with the words, "Next Tuesday."

He sharply tried the big swing doors, and they gave to his push. He then found himself in the lobby of the theatre, which two women were sweeping, and in the corner of which several tall palm-trees in pots, the branches still tied together, were set out in a row. A man was sitting in the ticket-office, another man was talking to him through the open window, and they both stared at Julian when he approached them.

"Can I get to the stalls through here?" he asked the man who was standing by the ticket-window.

"You can't get through at all," answered the man. "There's a rehearsal on."

"That is why I am here," answered Julian, taking out his telegram. It was much crumpled, and a rent in the paper had made the word "Monday" illegible. "This is from a friend of Mr. Conway's. You see, I ought to have been here at three o'clock, but I couldn't get here before."

The man took the telegram, having looked Julian over first, considered it, trying to piece together the part that was torn, and then passed it through the ticket-window to the other man, who was watching Julian closely. They were both silent for a few seconds, looked at each other, and then the man in the ticket-office said:

"You ought to go round to the stage-door."

"Mr. Thompson told me to come through this way, as I was to meet him in the stalls."

"Will you send your name in to Mr. Conway?" asked the man who was standing.

Julian was so nervous that he had to clear his throat before he spoke.

Digitized by Google

"Certainly; here is my card," he said, with an effect of coolness, and he put his hand to his pocket without any hesitation.

There was another silence; then, when he produced his card, it was ignored, and the man said suddenly: "Come this way."

He went ahead, down the staircase which Julian knew must lead to the stalls. Julian followed. All the way he saw signs of occupancy, an army of women cleaning and sweeping. Behind his surly, silent guide he had begun to wonder if, after all, he had the courage to go on, when they stopped before another swing-door at the end of a narrow, dark, close-smelling passage.

"Mr Conway is on the stage," said the man. "I won't disturb him now, but please send your name in when the act is over."

"Thank you," said Julian. "I will, if Mr. Thompson hasn't done so already."

He pushed open the door, and went in.

His eyes embraced the stage in the fraction of a second, recognizing Conway, seeing that another man and a small, dark woman were acting with him, and realizing that Blanche was not there. Not yet Blanche! The voices on the stage sounded thin and clear, floating out into the emptiness of the unlighted house, which looked unfamiliar in its mammoth swathings of white. Then, when his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, he saw two men sitting in the stalls some way back, and with an intuition that one of them was Carfrae he went out again. To sit in the stalls a little way off from Carfrae was impossible. There was dread in the very idea of being seen. He must get into one of the upstairs boxes, for there it was not likely that he would be discovered. And he was favoured by luck. He met no one on the way, and the box was empty. A sheet hung over the front of it, and he looped it back a little, just enough to see the whole of the stage, and drew up a chair.

How odd and clear and thin the voices were! But

Digitized by Google

what was happening ? For, without warning, there was a change, a sudden confusion. The rehearsal was breaking up, and for a perceptible second he believed he must be the cause.

Conway walked across the stage shouting, " Williams !" and immediately the others began to talk to each other in low voices. But then Conway came back, and in an authoritative voice that could be heard all over the theatre announced:

" We will go over the second act again, from the beginning of the second scene, *without a stop*. Remember, I won't stop for anything, as I am timing it. Mr. Carfrae, will you keep the time ? Now, clear the stage, please."

It was empty in a moment, and remained empty until the dark little actress reappeared and started to walk to and fro between the door and the window, with a restlessness that brought Julian's terrible disquiet to a head. He wanted to escape, and felt he could not see it through; but when two men—Conway, and an actor Julian had often seen in his company, a man called Orme—made their entrance, he said to himself: " I must listen. This is the play."

The people began to talk, then line followed line, the speeches succeeded each other, and each sentence, as he swiftly reviewed them one by one, seemed first to elude the ordeal of his criticism, then to ignore it. In ten minutes those excellent sentences had triumphed over him as they led him straight into these people's personalities. There was a brevity in the conversation that was never merely colloquial, a character to the scene as it developed that was not particularly modern, that did not particularly belong to any time or place—like the stage-setting, a drawing-room that might have been found in any class that was neither fashionable nor uncultivated. The character of the scene belonged sharply and conclusively to these people and their particular lives. Nothing extraneous was needed to make them interesting.

" This is intolerable ! When is she coming ?" he thought.

Digitized by Google

The name of Helena had not even been mentioned. He tried to remember the scenario he had read, but either he could not remember or else he could not piece it together. He remembered, however, the name of Greville. Greville was Helena's brother, and Conway was taking the part. He was doing well, Conway. Orme was always tiresome, but the little woman taking the part of Anna was clever and feline, and brought up the average. And then a bell sounded on the stage; it seemed quite close to him. "Oh, my God!" he said. But he wasn't sure if it were she, and these people in the play, who all looked at each other because they had been trained to do so—they knew! After a moment Greville jumped up, as the door on the right, opposite Julian, was thrown wide open. Blanche came quickly on the stage.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXVIII

BEHIND the footlights she was utterly strange, a whole world, a whole lifetime away. Yet she was so simple, so slight, and so pale; only a slight woman in a grey dress as she quickly made her entrance, but for all that the centre of his thoughts that seemed so vast. And then she was an actress, and that was such a difficult, such an important thing to be. Her place seemed so great, and she herself so simple.

The waiting was at an end, and she was there, below him—so near that even in that hard light she wasn't more than pale. As she appeared in the doorway her whole figure had seemed colourless, almost impalpable, and like a spirit blown into their midst.

But with Julian there above her, straining towards her, she went over to Greville, her eyes only for him. He was standing quite still, looking at her, while the other two people looked at them both. When one of them spoke to her it seemed to bring her back a little; she moved quickly back to the woman, and suddenly she raised her hands, and in a moment had taken off her hat, in a swift, free gesture—a sweeping gesture, as though she had swept off a helmet. In a moment the hat, of white chip straw, trimmed with a pale grey ribbon, was on a chair, and she had turned to Greville again. And the loose, classic knotting of the hair, the poise of the head, the face, they began again to be hers; for she was no longer strange, no longer far away and pale, but herself. When Julian heard her voice he slowly covered his face with his hands. He seemed to grow helpless before it. . . .

It continued to sound in his ears, and in an instant it became impossible not to look at her, and he was looking

Digitized by Google

at her again, feeling that his eyes had not sufficient power to see. He seemed not to be able to see her enough. She was not changed, she wasn't even acting. She was just standing or moving; so few movements, such quiet! How was it possible, how was it possible that she should have kept so simple? "The genius of remaining herself"—wasn't that what Carfrae had said? But this . . . That first quickness, the impulse of her entrance, had died away, and there was a sort of a shrinking in her attitude to the other woman, and he remembered just that in her—that timidity and bewilderment. He had often tried to describe to himself the grace of her constraint. It was full of an exquisite awkwardness, he had said. He saw it in her again. . . . Then he asked himself why she should look only at Greville, and he seemed to lose the play, to forget almost where she was, and how it was he was able to see her. Greville spoke, and in a second he realized that Greville was no longer Helena's brother.

The play had been changed. Instead of brother and sister, there might now be the ordinary situation of hero and heroine, but he could not stop to reason it out. The other two were making signs to each other while she spoke to Greville, and there was a reality in that that made him feel a sort of personal shame. It was a fierce relief when Anna and the other man went over to the window. But then she, Helena—Helena, or Blanche, which was it?—came down the stage again, and Greville met her half-way. Julian felt him urging her to do something, and he drew her to the sofa; they sat down together, she looking at him still, saying nothing, but smiling. In Julian's state of tension the theatre created, for a few minutes at least, an almost perfect illusion, and he seemed to be watching her in her own life, a life at once extraordinary and natural. It was as if she were really smiling, with that intentness of hers that was so much more expressive than speech, at another man, listening to him, at last speaking to him.

She was in love with Greville. He understood at

Digitized by Google

once. They were not making love to each other, but Conway had only to speak those words, and bend his picturesque head a little towards her, to fill Julian with the utmost conviction of love.

Greville was leading her on to speak, was urging her, and all her ingenuousness, her innocence, was written in her face and in the clear eyes where the smile was dying and a question was growing to life. How ingenuously she answered him, disarming him at times! She, too, did not have to act. Her words needed no acting, only speaking, and what Julian called a diabolical subtlety had arranged her answers so that she revealed herself in them. She revealed only her daily sweetness, as it were, nothing deeper; but to have her on the stage using her own little expressions, her "She is so kind, her kindness quite upsets me," and "I am very stupid; you must forgive me," was like a desecration, an incredible blasphemy, or, again, like entering into the very heart of unreality. And who and what was Greville? As he asked himself the question it seemed to him that Carfrae had achieved a villainy he, Julian, could never have conceived of. He had confessed to an influence, but this passed the limits of belief. Just then Anna and the other man moved back from the window, and it occurred to Julian that they might perhaps go, and Greville and Blanche be left together. He saw the scene as though it were actually taking place—Greville taking her in his arms—and he knew in all his blood that he himself wanted to take her in his arms. He was on his feet, standing in the front of the box to show himself to her; but she had turned away, and was watching Greville going up stage. After Greville had gone, she still stood as if waiting for him to come back, and in a frenzy of impotence Julian hung between the front of the box and the door, not knowing how he could make her see or hear. She would not look at him. But he could make love to her as Carfrae with all his genius, Conway with all his picturesque looks and Carfrae's brains behind him, had never been able to do!

Though he was drawn back irresistibly, impelled to

Digitized by Google

watch, he did not sit down. He stood behind the protecting curtain as if ready to escape at any moment from the unendurable urgency of her presence. But as she was sitting on his side of the stage he could hardly see her, and the uncertainty as to what she was doing kept him where he was. The scene had changed, for another man had come on; and Julian waited, in spite of himself, to see where Carfrae was going, what the central idea of the play might be. The relationships were soon clear to him. Orme was Helena's brother, and the man who had last come on was Helena's father. These people were leading up to a crisis of their own, apart from Helena's, yet he felt more and more how her influence pervaded the play, and, passive and unsuspecting though it was, stood in every situation. He began to understand just what each one of the characters felt towards her; so much so, that he could be almost sure of what they were thinking when they looked at her. For a few minutes he felt these people so intimately that the personalities of the actors taking the parts could not obscure for him those larger personalities, and he seemed drawn against his will into the circle of an absorbing interest. Such a strange feeling was upon him that it was as though part of his life was among these people, watching her, while the other part of him felt a strange, a haunting curiosity about them—a desire to know more about them, and about the details of their existence, which he could not quite understand, which he could not quite see in the queer, grey unimportance of their setting. Yet he understood them in certain ways, for if he had been there he would have been just as tongue-tied before Blanche. He had gathered what the father and son and the feline, dark, little woman were trying to discuss, and he understood why there were such abrupt interruptions and such long pauses. That was the effect of Helena's presence among them. He knew, because he knew what one would feel if one tried to discuss such things before Blanche. . . .

She suddenly heightened the tension by getting up, but she only drifted a little way, and then looked back,

Digitized by Google

and he saw in her face that she was listening to herself. The play and real life merged together once more, and he felt that in real life, too, she was thinking of Greville. So the immense precautions the three were taking were all futile. She wasn't interested in anything that concerned them, but they didn't know that. They weren't watching her face; they were taking her for granted.

The curtain went down, and he felt he would not live till he saw her again. . . . Down in the stalls the two men he had seen were standing, and he recognized Carfrae in one of them, more from his height than anything else. It was queer to be hidden, high up in this shrouded box, while the people who occupied the very foreground of his life were all within a stone's throw of him, and had no inkling he was there. Conway appeared before the curtain, and talked down at the author, and while they were engaged together Julian noticed a man and a woman come in by the door on the other side of the shadowy theatre. After a few minutes he realized the man was Cecil Armathwaite, but it was without much interest, and without interest he watched him settle himself in the stalls. The woman who was with him had poppies and wheat-ears in her hat.

From behind the curtain came sounds of furniture being moved and men's gruff voices, and after a time Conway, who had disappeared, reappeared again and called across to Carfrae:

"Will you time this, too, please? I think we can get through it without a stop."

"I will see her, perhaps, in another minute," thought Julian.

She was sitting on the edge of a sofa, shrunk into herself, her feet drawn a little way under her, and the nymph-like quality in her beauty amazed him afresh. In the slight foreshortening of her face it was the low, wide brow, the classic line of the eyebrows and nose, and the sweep of hair to the full knot that he saw, and in contrast to the blankness of the *entr'acte* this vision of her was so poignantly sweet that he felt his resistance dissolving within

Digitized by Google

him. When one found a creature as beautiful as this! And then it became so incredible he should ever have lost her, once having found her, that he was forced to believe —and he was genuine in it; in that suddenly soaring moment he could not have been anything else—that he had lived from the time of parting in the spring only for the moment when he should see her again. "Oh, my darling, my most beautiful!" he thought, and was caught up into rapture.

In an instant she belonged to him. Her beauty, her mystery, her life, they were already his. Only a little time before it had seemed a terrible thing that these mummers should know more about her and her daily life than he, but he felt now as though he had triumphed over them all. He had triumphed over Conway, whom he was sure was in love with her, and he thought how he would always meet her at the stage-door. When she spoke he wondered if he were going to let her act in the play at all, if he would not have her break her contract; but when she raised her eyes he forgot such trivial considerations, and was penetrated with another kind of loveliness. When she looked down she was as classic as a muse; but when she lifted her eyes . . . If Christianity had never existed, he said to himself, that look out of her eyes would never have existed either. The Christian Ideal was in the curves of her sensitive mouth. Her ideality seemed to him no longer a disturbing element, but another aspect of her beauty to adore. It seemed already his.

But now she was looking at Greville as if trying to explain him something; she suddenly appealed to her brother as if she felt him to be inimical. And her brother was seeing a change in her, one felt for the first time. Julian watched her expression varying as though it quivered over her face, and even her eyes seemed to change and to tremble. Could this be herself? Not unless it were a memory—some memory of anguish and uncertainty, and Julian's suspense seemed to be coming to a climax.

Digitized by Google

Greville was gone, and, left alone with her brother, she rested a brooding look upon him, without moving, almost without turning her head. Her brother tried to speak to her, and she took a few steps towards him, lifting her dress a little in front.

"What do you want me to do ?" she asked.

"To listen."

She stood, her face statue-like, the folds of her dress about her rich and full as a carving. Julian listened with her to what Carfrae had to say of Greville, and in a kind of maze his intuitions and perceptions turned upon themselves, and could find no way out. His anger burned as if instinctively, out of an instinctive hostility, and then he felt it was the actor's limitations that were setting every nerve on edge. In every way he wanted her to break upon him with indignation and revolt. Remembering that promise in her acting, he expected, he hardly knew what; something that would sweep him up to a still greater culmination, a very crisis of living. On every nerve strained to its utmost her inexpressive pause jarred acutely and cruelly.

"God ! what is it ?" he thought.

At that instant her eyes, as if impelled, wavered and went past Orme. She looked up, and gave a cry that Julian heard in the furthest recesses of his life.

He thought that unutterable confusion ensued. He felt that the rehearsal was going to stop, the mummers disappear like puppets worked by a showman's hand. He and Blanche were going to be alone. They seemed alone already. Her recognition had created another world about him, and everything was possible. But when the tumult in him subsided, the uproar of voices died, and he never knew if they had even existed. Only Orme was evidently recovering himself, and beginning again, and she was standing, staring, her gaze becoming one with Julian's in a passion that seemed to him to unite them in spite of space. He leaned towards her, trying to inspire her with greater and greater love, to annihilate space, to become superhuman; and it was, perhaps, only

Digitized by Google

by chance that a word that was spoken suddenly became intelligible to him. Then his eyes released her, while a clear voice went spreading out into an enormous waiting silence.

"He found a note for himself on the hall-table, and it ran something like this: 'My dear Oblonsky,—It gives me the greatest pleasure to place my house at your disposal for the remainder of the season. You will find my keys in the left-hand drawer of my desk, but I would suggest that they be not committed to the butler's care, also that he be urged to wear his felt shoes whenever on duty.'"

"'Stimulated,'" said Julian aloud. "It was 'stimulated to wear his felt shoes whenever on duty.'"

Then, understanding a little better what had happened, he waited to see if an agonizing sleep would not break up, and he strike upwards into reality and daylight. Drawing back from the sight of the stage he sat down, and the first minute was like a hundred years.

He had come to be more ashamed of that letter than of the crime itself—more ashamed of it than of anything he had ever done. When he first grew out of the phase in which he had written it he had looked back upon it with the surprise with which one might contemplate one's former ill-taste in pictures or furniture. His taste had evolved higher. Then, little by little, that piece of ill-taste had looked ever meaner and more despicable. A man may never feel more than a sort of regret for his flagrant sins, and for something less in actual guilt and in evil consequences will suffer the self-contempt that makes memory a sore. The memory of that letter was a sore upon which Julian never touched. He felt now that he had been taken by treachery.

He opened the door of the box, but though he wanted to escape from the voices on the stage, never to know the end of the play or the extent of Carfrae's knavery, he found himself so dominated by her passion that, disembodied as a voice, it seemed actually to hold him prisoner. He heard her whole being throbbing itself

Digitized by Google

out in her words, and this coincidence of emotion made up the last act in their fragmentary drama. A thousand meanings broke upon his brain when he heard her cry out: "You have always misjudged him! You were able to see no good in him from the first!"

After a little interval he heard her add, without any trace of violence now, with the majestic gravity of faith: "*But I have seen a good in him that you have never understood.*"

She believed in him then. For a moment her belief in this man belonged only, absolutely, to their own lives. Almost it did not surprise him in the play, and that moment was filled with a renewed and solemn belief in himself. But the other voice answered her, and Julian immediately shut the door upon the stage. As he did so, he heard her give another cry.

"What is this play?" he asked himself. But that did not matter. It seemed as though she must know, as though all of this must have happened, and to remember that it had happened in a play seemed like insanity. At least somebody must know, and the danger was that she, too, would be told; and he and she had moved in a world where the rest of his life had no place, which such realities would destroy. Not even that ardour of faith in him that he still, dumbly, felt in his soul could reassure him, for their illusions about each other seemed the only atmosphere in which they could live. He had feared disillusionment, and here it was upon him; and if the order of events that day had been a little different he would have bound himself before he knew his danger, and found himself bound to disillusion and regret. Instead of passion there suddenly was only fear. He tried once more to see just what Carfrae had done, but his mind stood amazed, and he felt again it was all a delusion of madness. Voices had come to him at first, no words; then the voices ceased. He must leave. And in a strange state of incompetence he asked himself what he would have expected another man to do in that situation. . . .

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXIX

CARFRAE sat on in the stalls alone, seeing deep into a kind of rapture, so profound that it was quite still.

The third act had gone badly at first; so badly, that at one moment the tameness, the flatness, the blankness of it had been like sudden nausea to him, and he had got up to leave the theatre. It was as he turned away that he heard her give that strangled exclamation, a sound as though the words Orme had spoken were wrenching a sort of cry from her. And she was looking up as she sometimes did when she seemed to him to be gazing at a vision, but this time there was a change in her—so instant, so extraordinary, and complete, that he was terrified. Orme, he saw, was so taken by surprise that he needed several seconds to recover himself; as he went on with his speech Carfrae could see her drawing herself together, growing and strengthening and hardening into greatness, before his very eyes, and that idea of possession by some outside force suggested itself to him in terror. She took her cue. . . . Was it a memory at last of what she had once gone through? Had the play become personal to her? But for a few minutes their little lives seemed to lie far below him, for the result was so great that they, their ordinary selves, did not seem to have contributed to it. Those words as she said them then were so awe-inspiring in their passion and nobility that he was lifted into a region he felt he had never known before. Beauties were revealed that he had never yet dreamed of, as though there were a great illumination of something beyond her and himself, and beyond the people of his play. It was wonderful and awe-inspiring that one soul should believe in another with such passion,

Digitized by Google

but in that dazzled moment he saw still greater things; he saw more clearly into the unseizable grandeur of human possibility. That moment was too great for anything but humility, but inevitably it passed, and then the revelation seemed but that of his own triumph, and in a glory of achievement he felt himself a Titan. It was those words of his that had made clear what he had just perceived, and he and she together were showing the world what can never be wholly expressed, but that he had known and been able to suggest to her. When the curtain went down he, set on high by her, felt it was possible to be greater than oneself.

He was disturbed at last by a hand laid on his shoulder, and Armathwaite said in his ear:

"Marvellous, my dear fellow! Genius, genius! Was it the highest expression of life, or life transcended? What will London say when it sees her? Let's go behind the scenes now. . . . George, it was beyond all we dreamed of. My God!"

Just behind him a woman was standing in the aisle—Cintra Ellison—looking very pale, but in spite of her presence Armathwaite repeated, almost with a sob: "I want you to come behind with me." And as they all three made their way to the exit he babbled on without a stop, for Cecil was as shaken as he was capable of being. He saw that everything was more wonderful even than he had dreamed. She was so wonderful that it was impossible not to marry her now. He had had a time of jealousy, and a time of feeling balked, but now that there was no doubt of her future fame there seemed, oddly, perhaps, and yet not illogically to a turn of mind such as Cecil's, no doubt as to the rest of the future either. He was dragging Carfrae with him because she never saw him alone in her dressing-room, and in any case it was not yet the time for his great scene with her. That would be after a real performance of the play, with the audience applauding in front; and she would be pale, her face perhaps bathed with the heat of the divine exertions of her genius.

Digitized by Google

"Inspiration is as much a seizure as illness," he was saying, almost incoherently, as they came through the exit. "It can be as terrific and as unaccountable——" And then he saw a man stop short just a few paces ahead of them.

The light was low, and there was an excuse for Armathwaite to say sharply:

"Who is this?"

The voice that answered had an extraordinary quality of arrogance.

"It's Julian Eames."

At once Cintra drew back, through the door, into the theatre again, leaving the three men standing in the circle of light that glowed from the white globe of the incandescent gas. And Julian, in a sort of rage of self-possession, turned to Cecil.

"Well, my dear Armathwaite," he said, pronouncing his words with a mordant nicety, "I hope I find you as I left you—'ever'—like the Athenian—'delicately moving through most pellucid air.'"

Cecil did not answer, and one might have thought a mask had dropped from his face, revealing a natural expression of extreme apprehension. But Julian did not realize it as apprehension, for he was concerned only with Carfrae.

"Where do you come from?" Carfrae was asking.

"This afternoon? I was in one of the boxes, where I have been watching the rehearsal."

The silence acknowledged something extraordinary, until Cecil made a sudden and violent effort, apparently at conversation; an effort so sudden and violent that his voice, as if taken by surprise, began on too high a note, and he had to change his key.

"Most original, the whole thing, isn't it, Julian?" he said. "It reminds one of nothing else, for there is no idea of social problems, as in Pinero, and we are not forced to think of moral reforms, as in Ibsen. . . . The crescendo was surprising," he went on—impelled to speak,

Digitized by Google

as a murderer is supposed to be impelled to revisit the scene of his crime. This should have been the moment of his triumph over Julian Eames, this was what he had looked forward to, gloating over Julian Eames's discomfiture and defeat. It could have been a splendid moment, coming suddenly upon Eames, whom he did not know was even in England. But directly he saw Julian his own forces were scattered. It was he himself who was routed in a second, and, obeying a wretched impulse to conciliate Julian, he directed all his remarks to him.

"In the third act," he said, "one has the same effect as a change from a minor to a major key in music. The whole of that letter scene was like major chords, and the letter itself, how effective!"

Hardly knowing what he was saying, he continued, plunging his hands into his pockets:

"What is most interesting is that the letter is Mrs. Benwell's contribution to the play. It is a true story, I believe. She heard it about somebody she knew, and repeated it to George, and he made use of it just because it is so effective. Do you mind my confessing for you, George?"

But the other men had their own realizations, which were so great, in Julian's case so staggering, that it was a little time before they became even aware of the pause. Julian was the first, and he turned to Carfrae with exaggerated good manners.

"Before I go, let me congratulate you on the play, Mr. Carfrae, which surpassed all my expectations. I would like, too, to congratulate Mrs. Benwell on her share in it. I have not yet condoled with her on the loss of her husband." In a few moments he was gone, and Carfrae pushed open the door that led to the stage, and he, too, disappeared. Cecil was left alone.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXX

JULIAN had turned the corner of the passage, and had reached the swing-door, when he felt rather than heard his name spoken behind him, and, looking round, he recognized the woman whom for one moment he had seen standing with Armathwaite and Carfrae. He recognized once more the hat with the poppies and wheat-ears. Her dress floated about her a little as she moved towards him, and then he paused, knowing her to be Cintra Ellison, and this new interruption seemed so strange that everything in him paused, as if waiting to hear.

"Julian," she said, "I must speak to you. Where can we go?"

Not far from her the door of one of the lower boxes stood open. The end of the great sheet that protected the boxes above hung far down, but on one side, filling only half the opening, and as they went in, and she turned to him, he saw the reflection of the footlights like points of brilliance moving across her eyes.

"Julian," she said, "it wasn't I. I swear to you I never told." She added with a deep conviction: "It is strange"—not asking him if it were strange, but stating it to herself—"that this should come up again in your life, as if it haunted you."

"As if it haunted me," he thought, and he now felt quiet and cold. He looked across the empty house, and was astonished to think of the other box where he had sat so short a time before. This actual moment seemed an incident quite cut off from the rest of the story; so much so, that he could not remember by what stages he had arrived in this new situation.

"As if it haunted me!"

Digitized by Google

That was the explanation—an explanation full of a tragic dignity. He was explained as a man haunted and pursued, flung from his loftiest moments by a mysterious vengeance that worked through the treachery of those he loved best, because he was a man who had given too much of himself to one woman, and had crippled himself for life at the start. The consequences of his action might probably never cease to beset him, and he saw them like floating wreckage crossing a ship's course.

He was ready to go now—to go forth coldly and quietly with that tragic explanation, but Cintra stopped him.

"*Where are you going?*" she asked him.

Her question echoed in the silence of a sort of large surprise. In a few moments he was asking it of himself—"*Where am I going?*"—and finding no answer. He did not answer Cintra, and was not conscious that he did not, for he had begun to prepare for some unprecedented crisis.

Why was he not going to Blanche? He had been in doubt before as to whether she knew, and now he was sure, but he was sure as well, through all that labyrinth of complexities in which he could not understand what she had done, of her faith in him. Whatever she had done, whatever they had both done, she believed in him, so much that they could both forgive each other. But when he thought that, and when he thought of that scene as reality, a kind of anguish was spread through his entire being. He shrank from the memory of her ardour, and was it not excusable he should, when he had loved in her another kind of woman? Her defence of him, the passion with which she had expressed her belief, established a moral claim upon him, and he felt he did not have the strength to meet another claim. In a very anguish of weariness he felt he did not want the emotion of a confession and absolution, he did not want his new day purified by suffering. Nothing was worth the price of a fresh conflict, and he had wanted an unclouded sunrise and a poetic oblivion of everything that was past. Complete understanding with her, forgiveness—even a mutual

Digitized by Google

forgiveness—was not what he wanted, and this new aspect of her seemed suddenly to menace him. He did not want in real life that ardour, that faith, and what had once seemed the insufficiency of her personality was just what he now desired. He wanted, not her moral passion, but the wonderland of her illusions about him. . . . If only he could have kept her always as she had appeared to him when the curtain went up on the third act, when, sitting on the edge of a sofa, she seemed, though so gentle, so aloof and elusive! If only he could have kept her thus!

Oh, God, what pain! he thought. She would understand why he could not go back to her—no man could forgive what she had done—but could he himself be satisfied with such a reason? Was not, perhaps, this failure of love, this also, the result of having beggared himself so early, and was he to find in his very soul signs of the retribution of which Cintra had spoken? "Where am I going? Where am I going?" he thought, gazing at Cintra as she stood, shadowy, against the door, while the idea that extraordinary forces were at work in his life suddenly obsessed him. "The way I have always gone?" And he never knew how it came about, but in another moment he saw that that which pursued him was not the wreckage from any one act. In a strange and terrible flash of insight he saw certain habits of thought, like strands, running back and back through the web of his life, without a beginning, for when he tried to fix a period for their origin they eluded him, and he found them again in his youth. He saw the habits of thought and the ideas that had led him both to his elopement and its subsequent events existing already in his early boyhood, so that there had never been a time that had not contained the elements of this present crisis. There was, at last, a desperation in this piercing through all self-deception till he was revealed to himself as a man who always moved away when realities became too hard and facts too uncompromising; who never considered any responsibility completely binding, or any tie

Digitized by Google

indissoluble; who always slipped out of decisions that left him no loophole for escape, and out of the definite consequences of every act, to stand just outside the life of other people in a region of his own—a region magically tempered, where the light came as he wished, bright, or refracted into fantastic rainbows, and sound penetrated only at his convenience, as an accompaniment to the dance of his sensations. A simple question had shown him the way he had always travelled, and the revelation that had come to him was, not that he had lost too much through one woman, but that he had never had enough to give.

He turned suddenly to Cintra, and when she saw the nakedness of his failure in his face her heart seemed to swing downwards into a gulf. . . . His weakness was dreadful to her because she was not the cause of it; she could have forgiven him that, but instantly she knew that it was circumstances that had broken him, and she was one of those that cannot love long where they do not look up. Though he had never given her any heights at which to look up, she had always known it was she who loved the most, and for this she had felt inferior to him. It was because his charm and his essential inaccessibility had kept her feeling inferior that he had held her so long. But these fictitious values fell to ruin as she saw the expression of his face, and drew back. His haggard looks seemed to cry out for pity, and in confusion and terror she knew nothing but an instinct; that she could not pity a man for such weakness and yet love him too.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXXI

FROM the stage Carfrae looked up at the box where Julian Eames had evidently been sitting, and in a moment he had reconstructed for himself all that must have happened. She had caught sight of Julian, and Carfrae was almost sure of the very moment when she had—just when he himself had got up to leave the theatre. He remembered the cry in her voice that had made him turn around, and he remembered her upward look, while the manifestations of what he had thought was genius had showed themselves only after that. She had put a soul into his play only when she had unexpectedly caught sight of Julian Eames, and this seemed to rob the play of all its merit, of any other soul, and leave him with only an empty husk to mock him.

He and Conway were on the stage together for some time, as there was a difficulty with the scenery of the fourth act. When he went off again, he saw Blanche's "dresser" in the wings.

"Miss Benwell would be much obliged if you could come to her dressing-room, sir. She would like to speak to you."

She preceded him down the passage, and only at the door did he find voice enough to ask her: "Is Miss Benwell alone?"

He noticed her look of surprise, and it told him.

"No one has been in yet, sir."

He went in, and it was Blanche's eyes he saw before anything else. She was standing much nearer the door than he expected, but even so she took a step forward to meet him; and suddenly she seized his hand in both hers, looking at him as if all her strength went to the necessity of seeing.

Digitized by Google

"Hasn't he been here?" he asked involuntarily.

She did not answer, but, while her eyes never left his, the blood rose to her face which till then had been waxen.

"He hasn't been here?" said Carfrae. "Nor sent you a message?"

"I have waited too long. If anyone comes now, it will be too late. It will be too late," she repeated, again seizing his hand. "I shall die."

She looked down at their interlocked hands, hers clutching his, and he had time to be amazed at the strength with which she held him before that strength relaxed, and she almost fell against his shoulder.

"I've waited too long now. I've watched the door too long. If it should open——"

She pushed him away when, still feeling the shock of his surprise, he tried to detain her.

"It mustn't open now. It must never open. I've watched it too long, too long alone!"

"If I had not thought he was here, I would have come myself. When the third act was over——"

"Did you see him?" And the colour rose to her face again. Her look was, for a moment, like a promise of dawn.

"For a few minutes——"

"What did he say?"

"I hardly spoke to him. I knew you had seen him from the stage, and I knew that that was the reason——" He realized he was beginning to speak about the play, and stopped.

"But what did he say?" she whispered. "Where did you see him?"

"I met him just as he was leaving the box where he had been sitting, and where you must have seen him. I was with Armathwaite, and the three of us exchanged hardly a dozen words in all. But he spoke of your husband's death—just mentioned it. He never spoke of you otherwise."

While he was speaking he tried to find himself with regard to her. Julian not having come yet had changed

Digitized by Google

his feeling entirely, and in this little respite that had been granted to his personal life he knew that his whole life was hers, divided between her as the interpreter of his art and herself as a woman. During the rehearsal of the third act she had been only his interpreter, but when he thought Julian had gone to her he had realized the place that this slight figure occupied in his heart.

He became aware of her moving to and fro in the room, as though she could not keep still. He realized that she was still waiting, and he felt acutely all that she must feel.

"He saw me; he knew I saw him. It was in the third act, and I looked up." She looked up again, and then went rapidly to the door. There she stopped, and came back, putting her hands up to her temples.

"Did they hear? Did I scream? Did they notice, do you think? You don't know, you will never know; but the stage grew so large—so large, so huge, so enormous—that I couldn't see to the other end of it, and I couldn't hear what he said; yet I kept on with my part. But once I was sure I was not using the right words and I wondered what I had said, and then—it was such terror that my heart . . . and I thought . . . What is this that is given us?" she said, in a strong, resonant voice. "What is this miracle of strength?"

She was leaning both hands on the dressing-table, looking fixedly at her reflection.

"Why doesn't he come? What is keeping him?"

She seemed to be leading him through every feeling of which he was capable. Yet when she cried out in that resonant voice he seemed to hear the echoes of the third act about him, and he remembered how that triumph of his had lifted him to great abstractions; but this was the reality of that great scene. This had been her outlook behind the unconscious dramatic expression that had thrilled them all. She began to beat her hand against the dressing-table.

"He's coming, Blanche. If not to-day, it will be to-morrow. It must be. Only wait a little while——"

Digitized by Google

He strode to the door, as if, by opening it, he could find Julian outside.

"He may have left the theatre now, but soon you will know all his reasons. I am as convinced of that as of anything on earth."

A voice suddenly spoke in the passage, quite close to the door, and the effect on both of them was dynamic. But the voice almost at once sounded more faintly, and then ceased altogether. Carfrae thought the person who had spoken must have been running, and again he felt the commotion, the excitement, imagined all the confusion, that was reigning such a little distance away, beyond this door which was shutting them into a merely temporary shelter. He wondered how he would ever have the courage to leave this shelter, and then, when she continued to beat her hand monotonously against the dressing-table, he felt that here he was possessed too utterly by the desperate sickness of suspense.

"I'll go and find out, for we can't stand this any longer. Perhaps he has left word, and no one has thought to bring you the message. The fourth act will be beginning soon. . . . Let me go, and I will be back in a minute——"

When he returned she was still standing by the dressing-table, leaning her weight on her hands. Her head was bent, and she did not even look up when he came in.

"He's gone. He left the theatre about half an hour ago."

She did not move.

"You will hear from him to-night, or at latest to-morrow. I tell you I am convinced of it."

The blinds were down, and the room was in a yellow half-light which, in the depths of the mirror, swam into a golden haze. In the mirror her figure was dark against the reflection of the window, but around her head there was an edge like a nimbus of fire. As he saw her in the mirror, where brightness and shadow were concentrated in what seemed a world of their own, she was unrecognizable to him.

Digitized by Google

"You will see there is a reason," he said. "He will not have wanted to meet you in all the confusion of the theatre. He did not think it was possible to see you alone. You will see——" And only when she did not answer did he have time to understand what he was doing. He explaining and excusing Julian Eames's delay! He thought again of the ambiguity of his own love for her, but though he thought it was ambiguous he took her hand again, and while they remained close to each other his life stood still.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XXXII

THERE was no rehearsal on Monday morning; therefore, unless she sent him word, he could hear nothing until he met her at the dress-rehearsal on Monday afternoon. Sunday wore away at last, yet even when the night was over, and the room broadened in a chill, grey light, his suspense was so great he felt as far as ever from his object. Monday's dawn had come, but the day would never wear away.

Her new lodgings were on the fringe of Bloomsbury—a house almost at the corner of a row of houses all exactly alike, with area railings, white stone doorsteps, and iron or brass knockers. It was a desolate, but a very respectable street, and the lodgings were more expensive than Mrs. Turner's; but in the light of the salary she was about to draw both he and Blanche had thought them justified. Her "apartment" was on the ground-floor of the house, the sitting-room facing the front, while the bedroom, separated from the other room by folding doors of yellow grained wood, lay at the back. A fairly superior servant answered his ring.

"Is Mrs. Benwell alone?"

"Yes, sir. She came in a while ago."

"No one been to see her this morning?"

"No, sir."

He had not meant to come, then he had meant only to ask for her at the door. As the servant stretched out her hand, and without further ado knocked on the door of Blanche's room just behind her, all that he had felt during that day and night of waiting was concentrated into a single moment.

"Nor yesterday?"

Digitized by Google

"I don't think so, sir. And Mrs. Benwell stayed at home all day yesterday."

"Don't disturb Mrs. Benwell. She will see me when she is ready."

As soon as Blanche opened the inner door, as soon as he saw her, he saw it was not necessary to make sure, nor ask a single question, and he did not say a word as she closed the folding doors and moved to the chair beside the empty grate. When she sat down her whole frame appeared to contract, while he saw by the lines of her grey skirt that her knees were pressed together, as a person's might be in the throes of poisoning.

"I was just going to send for you. You will help me, and know what to tell them." But as if she thought her voice had not sounded she cleared her throat and repeated, though always in a whisper: "You will know what to say to Mr. Conway. I don't know how, but you will know all the business terms. . . . Then I will go back to Sidcombe. Not to the convent here in London, not just yet. But I want to go to Sidcombe; it seems to call me. It is the only place in the world——"

"Did you get a letter?"

"Hush! you must never speak of it. I shall never hear now. I know that. If I had been going to hear, he would not have gone abroad again. You told me, he knows my husband is dead, but he left at midnight Saturday. But if Crookby hadn't died I would have seen him. I didn't have to leave home till a quarter-past three on Saturday, so I would have been there when he called at Mrs. Turner's. I went there, too, this morning—that's how I know. If Crookby hadn't died—— But I know the reason!" she said suddenly. "Last night I saw my life from end to end, as though a light shone upon it!"

With that stronger, firmer tone, a look of wildness, which he had seen once before, came into her face.

"I saw where the beginning had been, and it is right that I should tell you; for all that time that I was deluding myself you knew it, and you warned me, but I

Digitized by Google

wouldn't listen. I went on deluding myself, and hardly heard what you said. But it has all come back to me, now that I see the hand of God!"

"What did I say to you?"

"It was about leaving the convent at Easter. I wanted to leave, yet I wouldn't look into myself and see why I wanted it. I see it now!" And while her voice and her words grew stronger and quicker, his fear of her fanaticism increased.

"I made other reasons. I explained away why I was unhappy, I even made myself a reason as to why I wanted to see him—a terrible, specious reason against which I had been warned. And you said, 'Don't you know why they want you to leave the convent?' and you might have said it of me. Yes, you remember. I know you remember!"

"But why go back over it now?"

"Because this is the punishment! A great light has shone in my brain, and I have seen back to the beginning. Crookby's death, missing him through Crookby's death, has made me sure, for so much could not have happened without a reason. The reason began long ago, when I first—— No, no; he is not to blame! It was Fate. Fate is God!"

Through her tears he saw the wild light in her eyes.

"It is all clear to me, or else I would die. But I see it all as though I were standing on the top of a high mountain. Only—do not ask me to act in the play! If you tell me I needn't, I will be able . . . I will go to Sidcombe. I can begin again in Sidcombe. I keep thinking about it; it seems to call me. But until I know I need not act, I can't begin again, I cannot live, I can't begin again!"

He groaned aloud.

"I cannot act; it isn't possible. I can't live through the third act, for I looked up—I looked up, and saw him then, and I heard myself give a scream. . . . I will always scream when he says those words. I will remember always, until I die. He gave me my cue, and

Digitized by Google

when it comes again—I will always scream, always, at those words, always—— I cannot act," she repeated, interrupting him. "Don't ask me, for I cannot do it. I cannot do it!"

"I won't speak of your contract with Conway, because that isn't the real issue. The real issue, for me, is something else; and if I could decide with myself what I was willing to do, I wouldn't think of the contract for an instant. I would go to prison to let you off—if I could decide! . . . My life has divided itself between two objects, and now it can remain divided no longer. I must choose between those objects. I am going to choose . . . and now I feel I have no choice. It has been decided for me by something so strong that I have no choice against it. What is it really that has decided? Selfishness so profound there is no end to it?"

She looked as if she did not hear what he was saying. Her eyes were so expressionless they were like holes in a mask.

"You don't understand what I am saying, and I am trying to decide which I shall sacrifice, you or my play. Trying! I have decided. . . . You see, at least I am hiding nothing from you—at least I have that much honour. But . . . Oh, Blanche, there is my brain in that play! Not myself in it—it is because it is not myself, because it is entirely outside of me. . . . I can find myself again, but I can never find that. Listen to me! Try to listen!"

"You mustn't ask me, George."

"A little while ago I could have given it up, but now . . . A sort of hope flares up again when everything seems dead, and now—— Why do I want to see my play acted? I have written it, and that ought to be enough. Why should I desire an audience? I cannot understand, but it is an instinct, a *necessity*. I *must* see my play; I *cannot* give it up. I am telling you this when I should be consumed by your grief, and I feel your grief. God knows it is not that. I have loved you like a lover, and yet I am consumed by the grief of your loss. Though I feel

Digitized by Google

your suffering could drive me mad, I would sacrifice you. But is it sacrifice? I am taking nothing from you; I am not endangering your happiness. . . . Do it for me, Blanche. Do it, because it means that to me. Not because it is your duty, or because of the contract with Conway, but because—— To what can I appeal? What inducement is there? What name on earth can I use? None! I cannot ask so much for myself. For whom can I ask you to do it?"

She glanced at him, and with a weak and irresolute gesture she pushed her hair back from her forehead; then, without apparent purpose, she rose and walked a little way across the room.

"The dress-rehearsal is this afternoon, in a few hours. I wanted—— But there is nothing left. It is a persecution!" she whispered. "This persecution in my brain, showing me everything from end to end, all that I did. . . . So much is made clear, all that Father Dudley said, and that I did not understand, because I think that then my spirit was dead from so much . . . But now it is alive; it burns me like fire!"

For a moment there was a sort of majesty in her carriage, and the fanaticism of her look made her almost terrible.

When she spoke again it seemed incoherently, and he thought she was wandering a little.

"But if there is no miracle I cannot do it! How do I begin? What is my first entrance?" She pushed aside a chair, and walked forward, putting out her hands. "Give me my first cue. Can I remember?" She sobbed. "It is all dark. What do I say?"

Finding her words, she delivered a short speech in the second act without stopping to take breath.

"What is the next cue? I have forgotten." She began pacing up and down, and once she wrung her hands. "I can't remember what comes when Anna says to me——" When she reached the wall she almost beat herself against it. "Nothing, nothing in the second act, as if I had never seen it. . . ."

Digitized by Google

She drew herself together, and, holding herself rigidly, she took two steps in his direction, lifting her dress a little in front.

" ' What do you want me to do ?' "

" Stop !" exclaimed Carfrae; " stop ! Don't go on !"

But as if he had merely given her the cue for which she had been waiting, she began the speech that followed the revelation of the letter, and, though he tried to prevent her, she recited it from end to end.

" It is true. *You have always misjudged him !* From the first, and now you blame him for this ! But he is not to blame. It was no more in his power to do otherwise than Life and Death. I tell you he *could not* have done otherwise, and I have seen it all ! You ask me how; but I tell you I know, for it has been revealed to me. I know !" she said. She stopped, and there seemed a doubt as to what she would do. Then slowly she made a cup of both her hands and gazed at them. . . .

" Remorse !" said Carfrae in a loud voice, and going to her, opening her hands, he, too, gazed at them, repeating, " Remorse !"

He drew her into a chair, still holding her, shaking so much that her arm shook in his grasp.

" I blamed *him*, I blamed them all, for what they did to you between them, and what have I done ? This remorse is so great that it will crush me !"

He stood up, and remained standing.

" But I have been born again," he said, after a long silence. " I feel as though, through love, I had escaped, out of darkness into pure air. I told you, I loved you like a lover, but oh, Heaven ! *this* love is different ! This love that freed me in an instant . . . This is brotherhood; this is humanity; *this* is Heaven !"

For a few moments the world ceased to exist for him, and he had no sense of mortal time.

" But you ought to leave before this evening, I think. Can you get ready ?"

" You mustn't go to Mr. Conway. I will act. I should trust God."

Digitized by Google

He did not even listen to her.

"Come," he said at last, "we must begin."

"George, I will act. There is to be a miracle."

"Act!" he said. "But that is a thousand years ago! I cannot remember even. I don't even ask your forgiveness, it is so far away."

"I don't understand what you mean. But I must act. You said yourself I couldn't break my contract with Mr. Conway."

"If you leave England they can't get you back, and what they do amongst themselves when you are gone doesn't concern me in the slightest. But you should leave before this evening."

"George, do you hear? I take back what I said. I don't ask you to release me. I don't ask it any longer."

"It is so impossible we cannot even speak of it. Why did you never speak to me? How is it possible that you let it go on, that we have gone so far that tomorrow should have been the production? Could I not have come into a new life by other means?" he asked himself. "I have come into a new life, but I cannot take you with me. Oh, God!" he said vehemently; "your suffering makes me doubt again. Where is that immensity now? Let me keep it! let me believe! Can you believe in me? After what I have done, can you believe in love from me? Oh, believe in it, for it is endless!"

She seemed dazed and utterly uncomprehending. Again she said:

"You must let me."

"Blanche, let me tell you everything. When I saw you last winter, it seemed as if I also saw your spirit, and then it was as if your spirit took form to companion me, so there were always two of you—you, and yourself more impalpable, more mysterious, yet even more the essence of you. . . . That was Helena, and was that a betrayal? I don't think that could have been treachery, but since! I took something that never should have belonged to me, and it seems to me now that it belonged,

Digitized by Google

not only to you, but to him. But I was governed by a cold and monstrous passion of creation that was ready to devour everything, that was ready, too, to think itself immortal. For on Saturday, during the third act, I felt that *your* soul, *your* genius, were inspired by *mine*, and then—I felt God-like! I felt that I had created consciously, with my brain, like a god. I knew then all the mystery and miracle of creation, and I think there will always be hours when what one has achieved seems extraordinary. Then those hours pass, and one is confronted with the few poor sticks of what one has really done, and one looks at them . . . But why am I telling you this? What I have wanted to ask, and have not dared—— Tell me, you knew, didn't you? You have always known!"

"What have I known?"

"What have we done to you?" he said. "We, and that extraordinary accident of beauty!"

He looked at her, and felt he was losing himself in the distance she was showing him. "Helena . . . didn't you know? Did you never guess?"

"I can't remember."

The clock ticked, and time fell gradually away.

"I can't remember, either — how we did it, how we began. What could my attitude of mind have been during that first rehearsal? . . . But try to remember a little! Try to remember the day I read you the scenario. Why didn't you speak? Why was it left until to-day?"

With her chin propped upon her hand she was looking at him sombrely.

"What time is it now? Should we be starting for the theatre?"

"I must be calm," he said, after a pause. "I would rather see you dead. I could no more see you do it . . . I could no more go back myself than create another brain, another nature, for myself. Don't speak, don't drive me mad——"

"I want to go back! I have a reason, but you mustn't

Digitized by Google

ask me. Don't reason with me! I see too clearly, I am too sure!"

"Will you parade your very soul upon that stage, and let us coin money, and fame perhaps, out of our very blood? I seem mad. But don't you know what I did? That I took one of the greatest moments of your life, the most sacred confidence you could have given, and wrote it up, and put it on the stage, and made you learn it, and saw you rehearse it, and corrected you, and coached you in it, let you, made you, repeat it day after day, between imitation walls, in an imitation room, with a prompter standing in the wings? Did you realize nothing of it all? Did you never see that Helena from first to last has been you?"

"What does it matter? You have never had my spirit. That is beyond you, that you can never touch!"

"Don't say that to me now!" said Carfrae.

"What do I care what you have done? I know what I have done, what God intended for me. But what is your play to me? Nothing!"

"When I tell you that Helena is you, can you ever go through with that third act again? Remember what it means, and what you showed me once."

He seized her hands again and opened them, palms upwards, as though he could discover their secret, whose gesture, by some strange chance, had accomplished a spiritual regeneration.

"Standing on that stage, knowing what I intended, will you express your faith in that man night after night? Will you be able to say, '*I have seen a good in him that you have never understood?*'"

"*Let me say it!*" And her tears suddenly rained down. "Let me say it for ever, to the end! I *must* say it, over and over, to myself. *But I have seen the good in him!*" She walked up and down the room, weeping at first, but with each word becoming more and more exalted. "Yes, I will say it, for it is true. I will say it to all the world, and every time I say it I will understand what was God's will!" She stood still. "What would I have

Digitized by Google

done if this had not been vouchsafed to me? And now I will tell you the truth. A little while ago, a few minutes ago, I wanted to act because I thought that one day I would look up as I did that day." She looked up while she spoke, with an exaltation such as he had never seen before. "Look up, and see him as I saw him then. But now I have more than hope! Now I have been vouchsafed a means of declaring my belief! *I have seen the good in him.* It is my mission to believe, and tell the world. Oh, infinite grace! Oh, God! how wonderful are Thy ways!"

BILLING AND SONS, LTD., PRINTERS, GUILDFORD, ENGLAND

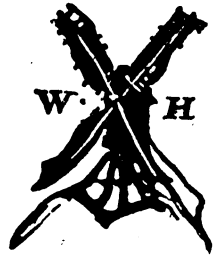
Digitized by Google

A LIST OF
CURRENT FICTION

PUBLISHED BY

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

AT 21 BEDFORD ST., LONDON, W.C.



MR HEINEMANN will always be pleased to send periodically particulars of his forthcoming publications to any reader who desires them. In applying please state whether you are interested in works of Fiction, Memoirs, History, Art, Science, etc.

Digitized by Google

WHEN GHOST MEETS GHOST

by WILLIAM DE MORGAN

(2nd Impression) 6/-

"The plot of Mr. De Morgan's novel is distinctly original . . . but what matters the plot in a masterpiece of character-drawing? There are several characters here whom it is delightful to sit and think about after closing the book. . . . Into the gradual evolution of these fine traits Mr. De Morgan puts all the subtlety of his art."

Author of

JOSEPH VANCE
ALICE-FOR-SHORT
AN AFFAIR OF DISHONOUR
IT NEVER CAN HAPPEN AGAIN
SOMEHOW GOOD
A LIKELY STORY

VANDOVER AND THE BRUTE

by FRANK NORRIS 6/-

Author of "The Octopus," etc.

"An extraordinarily penetrative study and certainly enhances the collective value of Frank Norris' work."
—*Times.*

"One of the most moving stories of a man's moral decay that I have read since Mr. Maxwell's haunting story, 'In Cotton Wool' . . . undeniably impressive and interesting."
—*Tatler.*

Digitized by Google

THE COST OF WINGS

by RICHARD DEHAN (2nd Impression) 6/-

"Richard Dehan has collected in this volume twenty-six clever short stories. They are all well designed, brightly —now and then, perhaps, over brightly written, and the authoress has a very clear conception of the value of the climax; she can keep her secret, if necessary, to the last line of her tale."—*Evening News.*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HEADQUARTER RECRUIT

(2nd Impression) 6/-

"There is real truth and pathos in the 'Fourth Volume,' originality in 'The Tribute of Offa,' and pith in nearly all of them."—*Times.*

"There is not one of the tales which will fail to excite, amuse, entertain, or in some way delight the reader."
—*Liverpool Daily Post.*

BETWEEN TWO THIEVES

(New Edition) 2/- net

"The book is really an amazing piece of work. Its abounding energy, its grip on our attention, its biting humour, its strong, if sometimes lurid word painting have an effect of richness and fullness of teeming life, that sweeps one with it. What an ample chance for praise and whole-hearted enjoyment. The thing unrols with a vividness that never fails."—*Daily News and Leader.*

THE DOP DOCTOR

(*Now in its 18th Edition*). 2/- net

"Pulsatingly real—gloomy, tragic, humorous, dignified, real. The cruelty of battle, the depth of disgusting villainy, the struggles of great souls, the irony of coincidence, are all in its pages. . . . Who touches this book touches a man. I am grateful for the wonderful thrills 'The Dop Doctor' has given me. It is a novel among a thousand."—*The Daily Express.*

Digitized by Google

THE DARK FLOWER
by JOHN GALSWORTHY 6/-

"Human emotion at the intensity that is begotten of conflict insoluble, and not merely of satiable and sated aspiration, is, at least, the novelist's pre-occupation in this volume. And, like the old tragedians, he stands apart from his grim rendering of life, drawing no moral save that of pity and terror. . . . One need scarcely say that with this novel Mr. Galsworthy has added another to his series of powerful, vivid, and sincere studies of human nature. His characters stand out with the firmness of life."

—*Daily Telegraph.*

Author of

MAN OF PROPERTY	COUNTRY HOUSE
THE ISLAND PHARISEES	FRATERNITY
THE PATRICIAN	THE INN OF TRANQUILITY
A MOTLEY	MOODS, SONGS & DOGGERELS

INDISCRETIONS OF DR. CARSTAIRS
by A. de O. 6/-

"The art of the short story is a rare one, and A. de O. not only possesses it in a general way, but adds to it what seems to be the skill of a specialist in the treatment of the professional motive inspiring all his tales . . . he is undeniably entertaining."—*Observer.*

THE PERFECT WIFE
by JOSEPH KEATING 6/-

"It is all written in the gayest, happiest spirit of light comedy . . . the whole thing is cleverly and entertainingly done . . . the story holds you interested and amused throughout."—*The Bookman.*

"It is a pure comedy . . . it makes excellent and exciting and humorous reading. There is plenty of good character-drawing to boot, and the writing is simple and effective and often witty. . . . Mr. Keating has written a very entertaining story, and we are grateful to him."

—*Daily Chronicle.*

Digitized by Google

THE MILKY WAY
by F. TENNYSON JESSE (3rd Impression) 6/-

"A light-hearted medley, the spirit and picturesqueness of which the author cleverly keeps alive to the last act."
—*Times Literary Supplement.*

"A book of youth and high spirits! That is the definition of this altogether delightful 'Milky Way' . . . this wholly enchanting 'Viv,' her entourage . . . as gay and irresponsible as herself. . . . Miss Tennyson Jesse has great gifts; skill and insight, candour, enthusiasm, and a pleasant way of taking her readers into her confidence . . . the final impression is that she enjoyed writing her book just as much as this reviewer has enjoyed reading it."
—*Daily Mail.*

A LADY AND HER HUSBAND
by AMBER REEVES (2nd Impression) 6/-

"Miss Amber Reeves' second novel is a very distinguished achievement. . . . It has surely the air of a singularly interesting novel! The sketch of it has extraordinarily the air of the sketch of a good play. That, I suppose, is because Miss Reeves has kept it so single and so inevitable. As a matter of fact the novel does constantly remind one of a good play: the people are objective not to omniscience but to one another. Miss Reeves is certainly the mistress of a very pretty method. . . . It is the best novel that has come from a woman's pen in the present year and perhaps the best novel that is likely to."
—*Globe.*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE REWARD OF VIRTUE 6/-

"There is cleverness enough and to spare, but it is . . . a spontaneous cleverness, innate, not laboriously acquired. . . . The dialogue . . . is so natural, so unaffected, that it is quite possible to read it without noticing the high artistic quality of it. . . . For a first novel Miss Reeves's is a remarkable achievement; it would be a distinct achievement even were it not a first novel."
—*Daily Chronicle.*

Digitized by Google

THE BUSINESS OF A GENTLEMAN

by H. N. DICKINSON (2nd Impression) 6/-

Author of "Keddy," "Sir Guy and Lady Rannard," etc.

"His tale is undoubtedly refreshing. He is obviously sincere. . . . His whole book is a plea for the personal responsibility of all landowners and employers of labour. Distinctly this is a novel to be read, for it is the work of one who has the courage of conviction, and who thinks for himself."—*Standard*

"Mr. H. N. Dickinson's new novel is one of the most humorous books we have met with for a long time. 'The Business of A Gentleman' is a satire on that grandmotherly legislation which seeks to regulate the lives of the poor—their amusements, their morals, their family and the upbringing of their children. . . . Wittily written with an atmosphere of laughter, touched with pungent satire, we cordially recommend this clever novel."

—*Everyman.*

THE TRUTH ABOUT CAMILLA

by GERTRUDE HALL

"I have not for a long time past come across a more vivid personality in fiction."—*Punch.*

"Camilla never fails the reader, and we are sure very few readers will fail to give her enough admiration and affection to satisfy her passionate amour propre. For ourselves, we think her as delightful as she is amazing. If this be a first adventure in fiction it is certainly an extraordinarily good one, and the author is to be congratulated on what, with little exaggeration, may be described as a 'tour de force.'"—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

Digitized by Google

THE MERCY OF THE LORD

by FLORA ANNIE STEEL 6/-

Mrs. Steel's ever-delightful pen is here employed in giving us pictures as it were from her experience—stories of India, stories of the Highlands, quick impressions of modern life—each a rounded, well-defined tale, written with so sane a touch, with so pleasant a mind behind them that she makes the strongest appeal to her public.

Author of

A PRINCE OF DREAMERS
THE FLOWER OF FORGIVENESS
FROM THE FIVE RIVERS
THE HOSTS OF THE LORD
IN THE GUARDIANSHIP OF GOD
IN THE PERMANENT WAY
KING ERRANT
MISS STUART'S LEGACY
ON THE FACE OF THE WATERS
THE POTTER'S THUMB
RED ROWANS
A SOVEREIGN REMEDY
VOICES IN THE NIGHT
and other stories.

LETTERS FROM LÀ-BAS

by RACHEL HAYWARD 6/-

Author of "The Hippodrome."

"It is a book distinctly out of the common run, but with clear evidence of power, and makes us eagerly expectant as to the next novel Miss Hayward may publish."

—*Bookseller.*

"The book is clever, unconventional, and well worth reading."—*Court Journal.*

Digitized by Google

THE HOUSE IN DEMETRIUS ROAD

by J. D. BERESFORD 6/-

This story is the study of a mysterious man, a man of undoubted mental force, subtly and skilfully written. The three chief characters, Greg, the mystery, Mary, his sister-in-law, and Martin Bond, are real and living; the medley of something like genius, cunning, weakness of will and force of personality in Greg being extraordinarily well depicted.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

GOSLINGS 6/-

"Many of the scenes of his book will live long in the imagination. The book is packed with such striking episodes, which purge the intellect, if not always the soul, with pity and terror and wonder. Mr. Beresford has, in fact, proved once again that, even if he may appear somewhat unsympathetic on the emotional side, he has an intellectual grasp as strong and as sure as that of any living novelist."—*Morning Post.*

A BAND OF BROTHERS

by CHARLES TURLEY 6/-

"The plot of 'A Band of Brothers' is not only excellent, but quite original. . . . Mr. Turley's book, though as a story it will give abundant pleasure to juniors, will appeal with even greater effect to parents and guardians."
—*Spectator.*

"Mr. Turley has a greater gift for interpreting the mind of the school boy and for envisaging his conditions, than any living writer. We are inclined, after reading 'A Band of Brothers,' to say that he is our greatest writer of school stories, not excluding Thomas Hughes."
—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

Digitized by Google

THE MOUNTAIN APART

by JAMES PROSPER 6/-

"This is not merely a 'clever' novel, but a book of marked originality, in which are neither villains nor saints, but real people whom we come to know intimately. . . . It is a book that should be read carefully, and we wish its author the large public that such work deserves."—*Academy.*

THE LIFE MASK 6/-

by the Author of "He Who Passed."

"A highly remarkable novel, with a plot both striking and original, and written in a style quite distinctive and charming."

"Seldom, if ever, has a tale given me so genuine a surprise or such an unexpectedly creepy sensation."

Punch.

HE WHO PASSED

To M. L. G. (6th Impression) 6/-

"As a story, it is one of the most enthralling I have read for a long time. . . . Six—seven o'clock struck—half-past-seven—and yet this extraordinary narrative of a woman's life held me absolutely enthralled. . . . I forgot the weather; I forgot my own grievances; I forgot everything, in fact, under the spell of this wonderful book. . . . In fact the whole book bears the stamp of reality from cover to cover. There is hardly a false or strained note in it. It is the ruthless study of a woman's life. . . . If it is not the novel of the season, the season is not likely to give us anything much better."—*The Tatler.*

ALSO POPULAR EDITION, 2/- NET.

Digitized by Google

STORIES OF INDIA
by ROSE REINHARDT ANTHON 6/-

"In her 'Stories of India' Miss Rose Reinhardt Anthon has given us a remarkable book . . . wonderfully stimulating to the imagination. The stories are told with a quaint compelling charm, and their directness and simplicity are infinitely refreshing to the jaded mind of the reviewer, tired by the trivialities of much modern fiction."
—*Everyman.*

"The stories will be appreciated for their novelty and freshness, and for the insight they afford into the Indian mind."—*Academy.*

"The stories are always picturesque and pointed. They interest apart from their elusive and charming suggestions of deep and hidden truth . . . and the book has a fine flavour of mythology."—*Scotsman.*

THE ISLAND
by ELEANOR MORDAUNT 6/-

Author of "The Cost of It," "The Garden of Contentment," etc.

This charming volume of stories shows the whole range of this author's talents. It is a book that will be bought and read by all admirers of the "Garden of Contentment," and they should not be disappointed, for it is full of the spirit which has made this author so popular.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

LU OF THE RANGES 6/-

"Miss Eleanor Mordaunt has the art, not only of visualizing scenes with such imminent force that the reader feels the shock of reality, but of sensating the emotions she describes. A finely written book, full of strong situations."—*Everyman.*

Digitized by Google

GROWING PAINS
by IVY LOW (2nd Impression) 6/-

"It is a clever study of a modern young woman that Miss Ivy Low has written, clever in its frank presentation of the thoughts and actions of a somewhat over self-conscious girl who wishes to find her place in the world and fumbles and blunders in the seeking."—*Daily Telegraph.*

The GARDEN WITHOUT WALLS
by CONINGSBY DAWSON 6/-

". . . work of such genuine ability that its perusal is a delight and its recommendation to others a duty. . . . It is a strong book, strong in every way, and it is conceived and executed on a large scale. But long as it is, there is nothing superfluous in it; its march is as orderly and stately as the pageant of life itself . . . and it is a book, too, that grows on you as you read it . . . and compels admiration of the talent and skill that have gone to its writing and the observation and reflection that have evolved its philosophy of life."—*Glasgow Herald.*

THE MERRY MARAUDERS
by ARTHUR J. REES 6/-

"'The Merry Marauders' in no way belies its title. In a gay, light-hearted fashion, whose fun is infectious, it tells of the vicissitudes of a humble dramatic company in their efforts to amuse New Zealand. . . . A book in which there is a laugh on every page is a rare thing now-a-days. And 'The Merry Marauders' have left us their debtor."—*Outlook.*

LIBBY ANN
by SADIE CASEY 6/-

"A delightful story of Irish village life, written with intimate knowledge, and a very vivid pen, resulting in a charming mosaic of small happenings, none of them made magically interesting by the craft of the author. If this is a first book, as it appears to be, it is a grateful duty to welcome the writer to the realms of fiction, and to hope that she will add many more such works to her record.
—*Daily Graphic.*

Digitized by Google

THE SHUTTLE

by Mrs. HODGSON BURNETT

Author of "The Secret Garden," etc. (New Edition) 2/- net

"Now and then, but only now and then, a novel is given to English literature that takes its place at once and without dispute among the greater permanent works of fiction. Such a novel is 'The Shuttle.' Breadth and sanity of outlook, absolute mastery of human character and life, bigness of story interest place Mrs. Hodgson Burnett's new book alongside the best work of George Eliot, and make one keenly aware that we are in danger of forgetting the old standards and paying too much homage to petty work. The dignity and strength of a great novel such as this put to the blush all but a very few English storytellers."—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

THE WEAKER VESSEL

by E. F. BENSON 6/-

"Among the writers of the present day who can make fiction the reflection of reality, one of the foremost is Mr. E. F. Benson. From the very beginning the interest is enchained."—*Daily Telegraph.*

JUGGERNAUT	*THE LUCK OF THE VAILS
*ACCOUNT RENDERED	*MAMMON & CO.
AN ACT IN A BACKWATER	*PAUL
*THE ANGEL OF PAIN	THE PRINCESS SOPHIA
*THE BOOK OF MONTHS	*A REAPING
*THE CHALLONERS	THE RELENTLESS CITY
*THE CLIMBER	*SCARLET AND HYSSOP
THE HOUSE OF DEFENCE	*SHEAVES
*THE IMAGE IN THE SAND	

Each Crn. 8vo. Price 6/-.

Those volumes marked * can also be obtained in the Two Shilling net Edition, and also the following volumes

THE OSBORNES THE VINTAGE DODO

*** "The Book of Months" and "A Reaping" form one volume in this Edition.

Digitized by Google

THE WOMAN THOU GAVEST ME

by HALL CAINE (7th Large Impression) 6/-

"The filling in of the story is marked by all Mr. Hall Caine's accustomed skill. There is a wealth of varied characterisation, even the people who make but brief and occasional appearances standing out as real individuals, and not as mere names. . . . In description, too, the novelist shows that his hand has lost nothing of its cunning. . . . Deeply interesting as a story—perhaps one of the best stories that Mr. Hall Caine has given us—the book will make a further appeal to all thoughtful readers for its frank and fearless discussion of some of the problems and aspects of modern social and religious life."
—*Daily Telegraph.*

"Hall Caine's voice reaches far; in this way 'The Woman Thou Gavest Me' strikes a great blow for righteousness. There is probably no other European novelist who could have made so poignant a tale of such simple materials. In that light Mr. Hall Caine's new novel is his greatest achievement."—*Daily Chronicle.*

Other NOVELS of HALL CAINE

(of which over 3 million copies have been sold).

"These volumes are in every way a pleasure to read. Of living authors, Mr. Hall Caine must certainly sway as multitudinous a following as any living man. A novel from his pen has become indeed for England and America something of an international event."—*Times.*

Author of

THE BONDMAN 6/-, 2/-, 7d. net.	THE ETERNAL CITY 6/-, 2/-
CAPT'N DAVEYS HONEY-MOON 2/-	THE MANXMAN 6/-, 2/-
MY STORY 6/-, 2/- net.	THE PRODIGAL SON 6/-
THE WHITE PROPHET 6/-	THE SCAPEGOAT 6/-, 7d. net.
	THE CHRISTIAN 6/-, 2/-

Digitized by Google

KATYA

by FRANZ DE JESSEN (2nd Impression) 6/-

"To a certain number of readers in this country the writings of M. de Jessen are known as those of a brilliant war correspondent and traveller, a man who has kept tryst with danger and adventure in many lands. This is the first time that he has appeared in England, at any rate, as a writer of fiction. His novel, 'Katya,' possesses a threefold value: in the first place he has woven into it, in very intimate fashion, some of the tragic and exciting happenings that took place in Russian and Balkan lands some dozen and less years ago; secondly, the story itself is one of intense human interest; and lastly, it gives as brilliant and true a picture of modern Russian life as any that one can remember in a recent work of fiction."

—*Morning Post.*

"From start to end it is a strong and beautiful book, head and shoulders and torso above the ruck, not to be gained in one reading and unlikely to be grudged a second by readers who have brains and heart."—*Evening Standard.*

SMALL SOULS

by LOUIS COUPERUS 6/-

Translated by ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTEOS.

"We most cordially hope the reception will justify the translation of all four, for the taste of the first makes us hunger for the others. . . . A master of biting comedy, a psychologist of rare depth and finesse, and a supreme painter of manners."—*Pall Mall Gazette.*

Digitized by Google

JOHN CHRISTOPHER:

I. Dawn and Morning. II. Storm and Stress.

III. John Christopher in Paris

IV. The Journey's End

by ROMAIN ROLLAND each 6/-

Translated by GILBERT CANNAN. Author of "Little Brother," etc.

"A noble piece of work, which must, without any doubt whatever, ultimately receive the praise and attention which it so undoubtedly merits. . . . There is hardly a single book more illustrative, more informing and more inspiring . . . than M. Romain Rolland's creative work, 'John Christopher.'"—*The Daily Telegraph.*

KERNO: A Stone

by TARELLA QUIN (Mrs. Daskein) 6/-

Author of "A Desert Rose."

"Mrs. Daskein can tell a story and keeps her characters, who are all individual and well marked, on the move from start to finish."—*Sunday Times.*

"A very readable and well written book."—*Standard.*

Digitized by Google

THE NOVELS OF DOSTOEVSKY

Translated by CONSTANCE GARNETT

Cr. 8vo, 3/6 net each

"By the genius of Dostoevsky you are always in the presence of living, passionate characters. They are not puppets, they are not acting to keep the plot in motion. They are men and women—I should say you can hear them breathe—irresistibly moving to their appointed ends."—*Evening News.*

I. THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

(2nd Impression)

"No other writer perhaps has given to materials so ugly, not merely strength and life, but grave pathos and tragic beauty."—*Times.*

II. THE IDIOT

(2nd Impression)

"In many of his novels, Dostoevsky has contrasted spiritual love and physical passion, but in no other has the terror of the conflict culminated in such tragic loneliness as in the final scene of 'The Idiot.'"

—*Daily Chronicle.*

III. THE POSSESSED

IV. CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

THE NOVELS OF LEO TOLSTOY

Translated by CONSTANCE GARNETT

ANNA KARENIN 2/6 net

WAR AND PEACE 3/6 net

"Mrs. Garnett's translations from the Russian are always distinguished by most careful accuracy and a fine literary flavour."—*The Bookman.*

"Mrs. Garnett's translation has all the ease and vigour which Matthew Arnold found in French versions of Russian novels and missed in English. She is indeed so successful that, but for the names, one might easily forget he was reading a foreign author."

—*The Contemporary Review.*

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google